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The Spoils of Partition

The partition of India in 1947 was a seminal event of the twentieth century. Much has been written about the Punjab and the creation of West Pakistan; by contrast, little is known about the partition of Bengal. This remarkable book by an acknowledged expert on the subject assesses partition's huge social, economic and political consequences. Using previously unexplored sources, the book shows how and why the borders were redrawn, as well as how the creation of new nation states led to unprecedented upheavals, massive shifts in population and wholly unexpected transformations of the political landscape in both Bengal and India. The book also reveals how the spoils of partition, which the Congress in Bengal had expected from the new boundaries, were squandered over the twenty years which followed. This is an original and challenging work with findings that change our understanding of partition and its consequences for the history of the sub-continent.

JOYA CHATTERJI, until recently Reader in International History at the London School of Economics, is Lecturer in the History of Modern South Asia at Cambridge, Fellow of Trinity College, and Visiting Fellow at the LSE. She is the author of *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition* (1994).

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The Spoils of Partition

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Joya Chatterji
University of Cambridge

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Abbreviations

AICC	All-India Congress Committee
AIHM	All-India Hindu Mahasabha
BPHM	Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
FB	Forward Bloc
FBM	Forward Bloc (Marxist)
FBR	Forward Bloc (Ruikar)
FRBI	Fortnightly Reports of Border Incidents in West Bengal
GB IB	Government of Bengal Intelligence Branch
GB SB	Government of Bengal Special Branch
KMPP	Krishak Majdoor Praja Party
MLA	member of Legislative Assembly
NAI	National Archives of India
NMML	Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
NVBKP	Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad
PSP	Praja Socialist Party
RCPI	Revolutionary Communist Party of India
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party
SFR	Secret Fortnightly Report
SPM	Syama Prasad Mookerjee
SUC	Socialist Unity Centre
UCRC	United Central Refugee Council
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
WBMHA	West Bengal Ministry of Home Affairs
WBPCC	West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee
WCR	Weekly Confidential Report
WPI	Workers' Party of India

Glossary

adhiar	sharecropper
adivasi	original (tribal) inhabitant
anjuman	association (Muslim)
antahpur	inner chambers of the household
atmiya	one's own, related by blood
atmiya-swajan	kinsfolk
babu	traditional (Hindu) title of respect; Anglo-Indian term (pejorative) for western-educated Hindus
bangaal	native of eastern Bengal (pejorative: unsophisticated rustic)
bastuhara	refugee
benami	nominal transfer (of property) in another person's name
bhadralok	gentlefolk
bustee	tenement, slum
char	sandbank
crore	ten million
dada	lit. elder brother; leader of party, faction or gang
desh	nation, province, native place, village
dewan	finance minister or financial steward
dooars	lit. gateway; foothills of the Himalayas
gherao	lit. to surround; to gather round threateningly and hold captive
ghoti	native of western Bengal
go-korbani	cow-sacrifice
goonda	ruffian, thug
jamaat	(Muslim religious) association
jhi	maidservant
kisan sabha	peasant association
lakh	hundred thousand
lascar	sailor, naval soldier

lathi	bamboo stave
lungi	long loincloth
maidan	field, park
mastaan	a rowdy, gang-leader or boss of a locality
maund	82.28 pounds (or 40 *seers*)
mofussil	district, countryside
mohalla	neighbourhood
muhajir	lit. pilgrim; Muslim refugees in Pakistan
nawab	a (Muslim) prince or viceroy
pargana	administrative unit, revenue district
pice	1/64th of the old rupee
pie	1/192nd of the old rupee
samaj	society
sangathan	unity, consolidation
sardar	boss, gangleader, foreman
satyagraha	lit. truth-force; campaign led by Gandhi
sharki	arrow
shiksha	knowledge
shuddhi	ritual purification (Hindu)
tebhaga	in three parts
thana	police station or criminal district
zamindari	landholding on which revenue is payable, large estate
zulum	oppression

Preface and acknowledgements

This book investigates the partition of India and in particular of Bengal: the rationale behind it, as well as its consequences. This has required a perspective which is sensitive to the continuities and changes in the sub-continent since 1947. In consequence, the book's approach has been deliberately and necessarily historical, and as far as possible the analysis has been grounded in primary sources.

In its turn, this approach has determined the scope of the analysis, both geographical and temporal. Sadly, in 1947 the archives and academies of India also were divided between the two successor states, and since that time scholars on one side have faced great obstacles in gaining access to sources on the other. Moreover, many key documents of the government of East Bengal were destroyed in the civil war of 1971, which has made comparing developments in India and Pakistan even more difficult. Hence the focus of the analysis has been on the Indian side of the border. The study ends in 1967, in part a consequence of the difficulties of gaining access to primary materials, whether public or private, for the period after that date. But there are other reasons why the book ends in 1967. Events in both West Bengal and India took a dramatically different turn in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so there is a logic, both for the narrative and for the analysis, to concluding the account with the elections of 1967. These limitations notwithstanding, the work will, I hope, demonstrate the advantages of bringing a historical perspective to bear upon our understanding of the Great Divide and of India after independence.

The focus of the work is on West Bengal and on India, but it has, I believe, a relevance beyond South Asia. It suggests comparisons with other new polities produced by the great partitions of the twentieth century, whether in Europe, Asia or Africa, and with other mass migrations brought about by partitions. The overall purpose has been to make the work accessible to readers who are not specialists in the study of South Asia, and this has influenced the conventions I have adopted in regard to translation and transliteration. Place names are spelt in the way

they were at the time or are most familiarly known – hence 'Calcutta', not 'Kolkata', and 'Midnapore', not 'Medinipur'. The names of individuals are given as they themselves chose to spell them and are recorded in library catalogues – hence 'Syama Prasad Mookerjee' rather than 'Shyama Prasad Mukherji'. Translations from the Bengali are my own (unless specifically stated as being the translations of others); I have tried to give the 'sense' rather than being slavishly literal. Transliteration of Bengali words looks to Sanskrit roots rather than phonetic pronunciations; hence I use 'bhadralok', not 'bhodrolok', and 'samaj' rather than 'shomaj'.

Straddling as it does a period of change and upheaval, the book has had to take a view on how to deal with entities and terminology which changed during the period, and again the approach has aimed at ease of understanding. After India adopted its constitution in 1950, 'premiers' in the provinces were known as 'chief ministers', and the 'provinces' were known as 'states': I have always plumped for the most appropriate and intelligible word given the context. The terms 'western Bengal' and 'eastern Bengal' refer to geographical regions of the undivided province; 'West Bengal' and 'East Bengal' describe the new political units after 1947. After 1956, 'East Bengal' came to be known as 'East Pakistan', but I have stuck with 'East Bengal' so as not to confuse the reader.

This book has taken an unconscionable time to produce. The research which underpins it began long ago, and it has been written in fits and starts while many other things have made calls upon my attention. I have incurred many debts along the way, and it is a great pleasure to be able at last to acknowledge them. I began this research while still a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and am grateful to the Masters and Fellows for their generous support. Thereafter, fellowships at the Hinduja Contemporary Politics Project at the Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge (1995–8), Wolfson College, Cambridge (1997–2000), and at the MacArthur Foundation and the Malaysian Commonwealth Studies Centre (1999–2000) provided financial or institutional support for the research. Since 2000, the Department of International History at the London School of Economics has helped with research costs and with a vital term of sabbatical leave: I am grateful to my colleagues at the LSE for their assistance and their interest in this work.

Between 1995 and 2000, a quartet of able research assistants gave me invaluable help. I am indebted to Amrita Banerjee, Manjira Datta, Rakhi Mathur and Sharmistha Gooptu for their efficient and timely assistance in gathering some of the material on which this study is based.

A historian's debt to archives and libraries is a particular pleasure to acknowledge. My thanks are due to the National Archives of India and

the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. In Calcutta, staff at the West Bengal State Archives, the archives of the Communist Party of India (the Bhabani Sen Granthagar o Gabesana Kendra), the archives of the Special Branch and the Intelligence Branch of the Police, and the National Library were extremely helpful. In Cambridge, I record my appreciation of the staff at the University Library, the Centre for South Asian Studies and the library of the Faculty of Oriental Studies; and in London at the British Library for Political and Economic Science, and at the India Office collection at the British Library.

In Calcutta, Surjya Sankar Roy gave me access to the private papers in his personal collection; I am grateful to Sri Roy and his family for their kindness. Partha Bhattacharya facilitated my access to the police archives on which this study heavily depends: warm thanks to him and his efficient colleagues at Lord Sinha Road. Several friends and colleagues – Iftekhar Iqbal, Meghna Guha Thakurta, Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya, Ranabir Samaddar, Tetsuya Nakatani, Uditi Sen and Willem van Schendel – have shown me unpublished work on related subjects: I am grateful for their generosity in this regard. Others have led me to published work and sources relevant to the book: I thank Ananya Kabir, David Feldman, Joan Pau Rubies, John Lonsdale, Mushirul Hasan, Ornit Shani, Tim Hochstrasser and Sumantra Bose for their advice.

The arguments of the book have been rehearsed at conferences and seminars too numerous to list, but I express my gratitude to all those whose comments and criticisms have helped to sharpen the focus of this work. Early versions of parts of chapters 1, 3 and 4 have been published as articles; I have benefited from the comments of the editors of the volumes in which they appeared. Samita Sen, MacGregor Knox, Thomas Hillas, Shalini Sharma and Ben Rogaly read drafts of some chapters, and Gordon Johnson and Tapan Raychaudhuri read drafts of the whole book: all of them made valuable suggestions. Tanika Sarkar followed my progress with this project and was full of encouragement, for which I am deeply grateful. I owe special thanks to Rukun Advani and Permanent Black Press for encouraging me to publish this work. Indeed, their anonymous reader's comments were a huge help in getting the final version into better shape. I also derived much encouragement from the readers at Cambridge University Press for their perceptive understanding and valuable advice. Anil Seal read every line of every draft and had much to say about the flaws in style and argument. Any errors and infelicities which remain are, of course, my responsibility.

Friends and family sustained me through some very difficult times; heartfelt thanks to them all. In addition to giving me wise counsel and affection, Samita Sen, Sara McManus, Shohini Ghosh and Shalini

Sharma acted as willing sounding boards to my rambles and recollections about Bengal. They know how much I owe them. Samita Sen, Anindita Chatterjee-Ray and Kim Ray put me up in Calcutta at various stages of my research: I am grateful for their generous hospitality.

Tina Bone, with characteristic competence and good cheer, helped me get the typescript, index and maps ready for the press. James Smith helped me out when my computer failed at a critical stage. Karen Howes copy-edited the typescript with intelligence and empathy. I thank them all.

Some debts, sadly, can no longer be acknowledged in person. My father, Jog Chatterji, would have been proud and delighted to see this book published, although he would surely have challenged some of its conclusions. Peter McManus would have shared my pleasure and relief at its publication, even if – during our long walks and talks in improbable settings in Histon and Cottenham – he remained bemused by my fascination with matters fiscal and financial. Raj Chandavarkar, on the other hand, would undoubtedly have understood these preoccupations. It is a matter of lasting regret that I was not able to show him the final typescript; the book would have gained much from his suggestions and insights. My aunt, Snehalata Mukherjee, and my uncle, Khirodenath 'Kalu daktaar' Chatterji, in their own ways inspired this work, as did Pritish 'Tantu' De and Amar Raha, since all of them played a part in the events it describes. Had I not heard stories of their great daring as an impressionable child, this book – in a way a memorial to them – would never have been written.

My debts to Anil are too numerous to be listed: suffice it to say that this would have been a far worse book without him. My son Kartik has never known me when I was *not* the busy, 'stressed', would-be author of this seemingly never-ending work: his patience, good humour and affectionate tolerance through it all have been astonishing. This book is dedicated to them both.

Introduction

In August 1947 the British quit their Indian empire, dividing it into two nations. As a part of that historic division, Bengal and the Punjab, the largest provinces of British India in which Muslims were a majority, were partitioned between the successor states of India and Pakistan. Roughly two-thirds of the territory of Bengal was carved out to create the province of East Bengal in Pakistan. Separated by more than a thousand miles from the rest of Pakistan, East Bengal later broke away from its dominant partner to become the sovereign nation of Bangladesh. The remaining third of the old Bengal, in the main territories lying to the west and north-west, became the state of West Bengal inside India.

Bengal's partition in 1947, its causes and the role of its Hindu elites in demanding and getting a homeland of their own in India are the subject of an earlier work by the author.[1] The present book considers the enormous consequences of partition for West Bengal and for independent India. In the two decades after independence – twenty years of critical importance in India's history – the impact of partition proved to be more complex and far greater than scholars have hitherto recognised. Partition transformed Bengal and India yet, for the most part, the changes which flowed from partition were as unexpected as they were far-reaching. This study will seek to explain why.

In recent times, many new states have been the product of partitions and the redrawing of frontiers, with devastating fall-outs which are still little understood. Studying the aftermath of Bengal's partition helps to answer vexed questions about the formation of such new nations in the twentieth century. Discovering how West Bengal got its particular borders challenges the assumption that the borders of these new states were arbitrary or accidental. The profound ways in which partition affected Bengal and India show how new borders help to shape the polities they circumscribe. What happened to the millions of Hindus and Muslims

[1] *Bengal divided. Hindu communalism and partition, 1932–1947*, Cambridge, 1994.

who found themselves on the wrong side of the Radcliffe Line which divided Bengal is a telling example of how partitions play havoc with divided peoples, in particular those relegated to the status of religious or ethnic minorities in new nation states.

This book is divided into three parts, all of which centre on one main theme: the vast gulf between the hopes of those who demanded Bengal's partition and what actually transpired. In part I, the first chapter scrutinises the reasons why Hindu leaders in Bengal pressed for its partition and uncovers the assumptions underlying their demand. It exposes the complex, and little-known, considerations which influenced the making of the Radcliffe Line and throws a sharp light on the arcane processes by which the new borders were settled, explaining why some areas were included in West Bengal and others were not. Were the borders imposed, as is commonly assumed, by fiat from above, or did Bengalis have some say in how their province was divided? Why did Hindu leaders in Bengal want to keep some tracts in West Bengal and why were they ready to jettison others? In making these choices, did Hindu leaders take account of the economic viability of the state they hoped to create? Chapter 1 also poses the crucial question of whether any of the partitioners realised that many Bengalis, on both sides of the border, would have to leave their homes.

Chapter 2 is about the role envisaged by the Hindu leaders for the state of West Bengal inside India after partition. It shows how partition dramatically altered the balance of power in India between the regions and how West Bengal's leaders reacted to these changes. By studying the strategy of West Bengal's spokesmen in the Constituent Assembly, which framed independent India's constitution, this chapter identifies what the new state expected of India and how little it actually got. By teasing out the inwardness of Bengal's stance on crucial clauses of India's constitution, chapter 2 seeks to discover the point its leaders wanted to reach as they sailed through the uncharted waters of independence.

Part I thus enquires how vital decisions about the size and composition of West Bengal were made. Part II considers the impact of these decisions upon the people on the ground. Partition led to huge and unexpected migrations. In the past, Hindus and Muslims had lived cheek by jowl in Bengal, in the main quite amicably. Now they were forced to go their separate ways, with deeply destabilising consequences. Between 1947 and 1967, at least 6 million Hindu refugees from East Bengal crossed into West Bengal. This mass migration and the struggles of the refugees in the new province to find shelter, jobs and security are the subject of chapter 3. Among the issues that chapter 3 addresses are where these refugees settled and why; what kind of work they wanted and were able to find; what strategies for survival they adopted; what patterns emerge

in the tangled story of their efforts at rehabilitation; and what was the extent and nature of their integration into the society of West Bengal. It also asks how West Bengal's politicians tried to manage the refugee influx, which threatened to undermine the province's systems of social control. Another central question is whether the refugees were, as frequently assumed, passive victims of political events over which they had no control or, in fact, active agents in their own rehabilitation. Answers to these questions have a relevance which reaches well beyond Bengal to many other places in the contemporary world where refugees have congregated.

The exodus of Hindus from East to West Bengal was massive. By contrast, the numbers of Muslims who left West Bengal for eastern Pakistan after partition were relatively small. Most of them stayed on. Chapter 4 considers what 'staying on' meant for these Muslims. It asks whether they carried on much as before, or whether being reduced from being part of a majority community to a small and vulnerable minority radically changed their situation and their lives. The focus is upon the processes by which the Muslims who remained in West Bengal were assimilated into, or more frequently alienated from, its social and political fabric. Here again, the findings of this enquiry are likely to have a bearing on the crucial problems of integration which minority and migrant groups the world over have had to face.

In the book's third and final part, chapters 5 and 6 look at the fascinating ups and downs of party politics and the changing structures of power in post-partition West Bengal. Partition, independence and the coming of universal franchise created in India a wholly different political context which worked under a new set of rules. Chapter 5 studies what impact these changes had on Bengal. It shows how partition affected the power bases of different political groupings, in particular those of the old Bengal Congress, the main architects of partition. It also tackles the question of how West Bengal's changed political demography altered the social and regional bases on which every new Congress ministry had to rely. It assesses how effectively Congress was able, or more often not, to protect the interests of its traditional allies and supporters. It also focuses upon how well or badly the government of West Bengal responded to new challenges in the all-India arena.

After being solidly entrenched in office for two decades after partition, the Congress in West Bengal suddenly and dramatically collapsed in 1967. The sixth and final chapter investigates why partition raised the profile of opposition parties on the left, giving them new opportunities to win support at the polls from a hugely enlarged electorate. By using previously unexploited sources and by approaching these questions from

a new perspective, the findings of this chapter help to explain the rise of communism in West Bengal and its distinctive history in that state.

This work suggests that the founding fathers of West Bengal designed partition in the hope of restoring their privileges and reasserting their dominance in a new homeland. Under their enlightened leadership, they expected Hindu West Bengal to reverse its long history of decline, survive the disruptions of partition and win back its rightful place in the all-India arena. These hopes were to be spectacularly disappointed, and this book will try to understand why. It shows how partition fundamentally altered society in West Bengal, making it more polarised and more fragmented than ever before. It reveals why its political structures were unable to contain the rising tide of unrest and to manage the large, and largely unexpected, consequences of partition. It illustrates how failures within the province were compounded by neglect from a centre which had other concerns and other priorities. For a long decade after 1967, West Bengal collapsed, in an unremitting series of crises, into social revolution and anarchy. Later, under new management, it charted a different course. The object of this book is to discover whether these momentous developments had their roots in the unfolding logic of partition.

This work is, thus, about the impact of partition upon the social and political fabric of Bengal and of India. But the notion that Bengal had a 'natural' unity or an intrinsic nationhood which partition rent asunder is no part of the thesis.[2] Nor do the arguments underpinning this work assume that Bengal was in some way an 'imagined' nation. Even in the nineteenth century, Bengal's intellectuals still had only the vaguest idea of the territorial extent of their ideal *desh*[3] or homeland, and what social groups it might

[2] Such administrative unities as Bengal had come to possess were more the product of the pragmatic imperatives of successive empire-builders. Indeed, as Ajit Kumar Neogy's *Partitions of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1987) relates, in the hundred years before the partition of 1947, Bengal's borders had been redrawn on no fewer than five occasions. In 1835, the North-Western Provinces were excised from the Presidency of Bengal, and Arakan became part of Burma. In 1874, nine districts in the east were split off from Bengal to form the province of Assam. In 1892, two more districts in the south-east, Chittagong and the Chittagong Hill Tracts, were taken from Bengal and given to Assam. In 1905, Curzon's partition went much further: it stripped away all the eastern districts of Bengal to create the short-lived province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. That partition was revoked in 1911, but Bihar and Orissa were then removed from the province, and Bengal's new frontiers remained unchanged for only three and a half decades before the major partition of 1947.

[3] The Bengali word *desh* can mean 'nation', 'country', 'homeland', 'province', 'region', 'place' or even 'village'. In the late nineteenth century, when Bengali Hindu intellectuals toyed with ideas of nationhood, these were posited on a shared world of values of a putative 'nation' whose territorial location, limits and membership had never been

include. However much solidarity of Hindu sentiment the movement against Curzon's division of the province in 1905 engendered,[4] it is debatable whether a Bengali 'national' identity emerged from that campaign.

Yet, over the centuries, accidents of human and environmental history produced a certain cohesiveness in the region. Long periods of being governed as a separate province, whether by the Mughals or by the British, and interregnums during which Bengal asserted its autonomy had given its territories a measure of administrative integrity. Geography, too, in particular the dominance of the delta by two great river systems of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, helped to shape its distinctive character. Bounded in the south by the Bay of Bengal and by the impenetrable mangrove forests of the Sunderbans, and in the north and north-east by the foothills of the Himalayas, Bengal was criss-crossed by rivers, its terrain, in Spate's graphic description, a low-lying patchwork of 'new mud, old mud and marsh' gradually sloping eastwards into the sea.[5] Throughout recorded history, floodwaters deposited rich alluvial soil upon the plains of Bengal. Over the centuries, as its majestic waterways silted up with layer upon layer of sediment, the rivers, from time to time, broke loose from their old courses and carved out new outlets, which progressively moved their line from west to east. Human settlements tended to follow the shifting rivers, which rendered the soil of the east ever more productive, while older parts, mainly in the west, lost the fertility for which they had once been famed. As agriculture spread, population grew and trade flourished, these factors forged connections between the different parts of Bengal, knitting together their local economies into a larger whole. By modern times, the delta had come to share ways of life based on the cultivation of rice and a vernacular which, despite its local variants, was coming to be the *lingua franca* of the region as a whole.

Bengal's fabled prosperity earned it the title of 'the paradise of the Indies', but it also made it prey to the ambitions of conquerors.[6] From

precisely addressed. See Swarupa Gupta, 'Samaj and unity. The Bengali literati's discourse on nationhood', School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, doctoral dissertation, 2004.

[4] Sumit Sarkar, *The swadeshi movement in Bengal, 1903–1908*, New Delhi, 1973.

[5] O.H.K. Spate and A.T.A. Learmonth, *India and Pakistan. A general and regional geography*, Bungay, 1967, p. 557.

[6] In 1345, Ibn Battuta described 'Bengala' as 'a vast region abounding in rice . . . I have seen no country in the world where provisions are cheaper . . . But it is muggy and those who come from Khorasan call it a hell full of good things.' In 1516, Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese official based in Cannanore, compiled for his Lusitanian monarch a remarkably accurate geography of India and points east which reported that the kingdom of 'Bangala' had 'many sea ports', a 'Moorish king with gentile subjects' and 'much trade and much shipping' (all cited in Nitish Sengupta, *History of the Bengali-speaking people*, New Delhi, 2001).

the thirteenth century onwards, invaders who swept into India from central Asia and created empires in the plains of the north cast covetous eyes eastwards to Bengal. But only intermittently did they succeed in bringing Bengal under their sway, and for long periods Bengal's rulers successfully repulsed Delhi's imperial designs. For much of its medieval history, Bengal remained a marcher region over which the empires of the north had at best an uncertain control, and culturally it retained many of the characteristics of a frontier zone, between the settled agrarian society of the Gangetic plains and the nomadic cultivators and hunters and gatherers of India's north-east. After Islam began vigorously to spread in Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the region still had little in common with the Muslim cultures of the Gangetic north or of the Deccan plateau. By the end of the nineteenth century, Muslims outnumbered Hindus in Bengal as a whole and had become overwhelmingly the majority community in its eastern tracts. But most of Bengal's Muslims were humble peasants whose beliefs and practices continued to have more in common with local cults than with the Islamic orthodoxies and courtly cultures of northern India.

Paradoxically, it was the coming of the British that broke the mould of the past and, for the first time in its history, thrust Bengal from the periphery of the sub-continent on to the centre stage. At first, the East India Company's growing trade, conducted from Fort William, fortified Bengal's autonomy against Delhi, but in time its thriving commerce and the unstable polities of its nawabs drew the British deeper into its affairs. It was here, after the historic battles of Plassey and Buxar, that the Company 'stood forth as dewan' and began its move in India from trade to dominion. As the Company and Crown-in-Parliament strove to control their Indian possessions, the governor of Bengal was given powers over his counterparts in Madras and Bombay, the other two coastal possessions from which British power had spread over southern and western India. In principle only *primus inter pares* among the three maritime presidencies, in practice Bengal came to exercise dominance over the rest of British India.

In these decades, Britain's economic relationship with India changed. The metropolis increasingly saw India as a market for its manufactures and a source of raw materials, rather than an oriental grocer and haberdasher supplying the west with the spices, handloom textiles and luxury goods of yore. But Bengal remained a vital link in that relationship: Calcutta was the entrepot for an expanding external trade, its docks exporting commodities to the wider world and importing British manufactures for the growing markets of up-country India. As Bengal's traditional handicrafts declined, they came to be replaced by new products:

jute and cotton mills sprang up along the Hooghly, plantations in the north and north-eastern districts challenged China's dominance in the tea trade, and coal and iron from the south-west fuelled India's expanding railways. Fort William grew up into Calcutta, one of the east's largest cities, swallowing up foodstuffs and raw materials from its agrarian hinterlands and supplying processed goods to the rest of Bengal and well beyond. As mills, factories and offices sprang up in the city and its suburbs, as migrants from other parts of India flocked to its shop-floors, slums and shanties, and as Scottish *boxwallahs* and English *mems* took up residence in its more salubrious enclaves, Job Charnock's foundling became the capital of British India and the second city of an empire larger than any the world had previously witnessed.

It was these coincidences of history that created in Bengal a new social group which spread its influence over other parts of India, and which, in due course, would play a key role in Bengal's partition of 1947. This was the famed Bengali *bhadralok*, the 'gentlefolk' about whom so much has been written, not least by themselves. In Bengal, as in other parts of India, those who stepped up to take advantage of the new opportunities created by British rule tended in the main to be Hindus of high caste, with traditions of literacy and service in government and the professions. But Bengal's distinctive system of land revenue gave these would-be service groups particular advantages and unusual features. In 1793, the British imposed a Permanent Settlement on Bengal which settled hereditary rights of property upon erstwhile rural magnates and revenue farmers. By fixing in perpetuity the tax demand from the landlords, the Settlement gave Hindu elites the chance to derive uncovenanted benefits from these new arrangements. Many bought their way into a complex hierarchy of tenurial rights, becoming rentiers with incomes from the land which supplemented earnings from their white-collar occupations but, significantly, without them having to play any part in agricultural production. Increasingly, they settled in Calcutta and other district towns in Bengal as absentee landlords and rent-receivers, where they became an archetypical service class which helped to man the growing bureaucracy of British India. Taking enthusiastically to English education in the middle of the nineteenth century, and setting up schools and colleges of their own in the western tradition, the bhadralok of Bengal were well placed to win a prominent role for themselves in the service of their new rulers, in particular after 1837 when English displaced Persian as the language of governance. As subordinate officials of an expanding empire, they travelled in its baggage trains into upper India, to Patna, Allahabad, Lahore and Jubbulpore, and eastwards to Assam and further afield to Rangoon, where by the late nineteenth century Bengali *babus* were an ubiquitous

presence. But the expansion of British India also thrust them deep into the backwaters of eastern Bengal as postmasters, court officials, lawyers, schoolteachers and clerks. By the early twentieth century, bhadralok Hindus were still a small minority of the population of eastern Bengal, but had come overwhelmingly to dominate its rentier economy, its centres of education, its services and its professions.

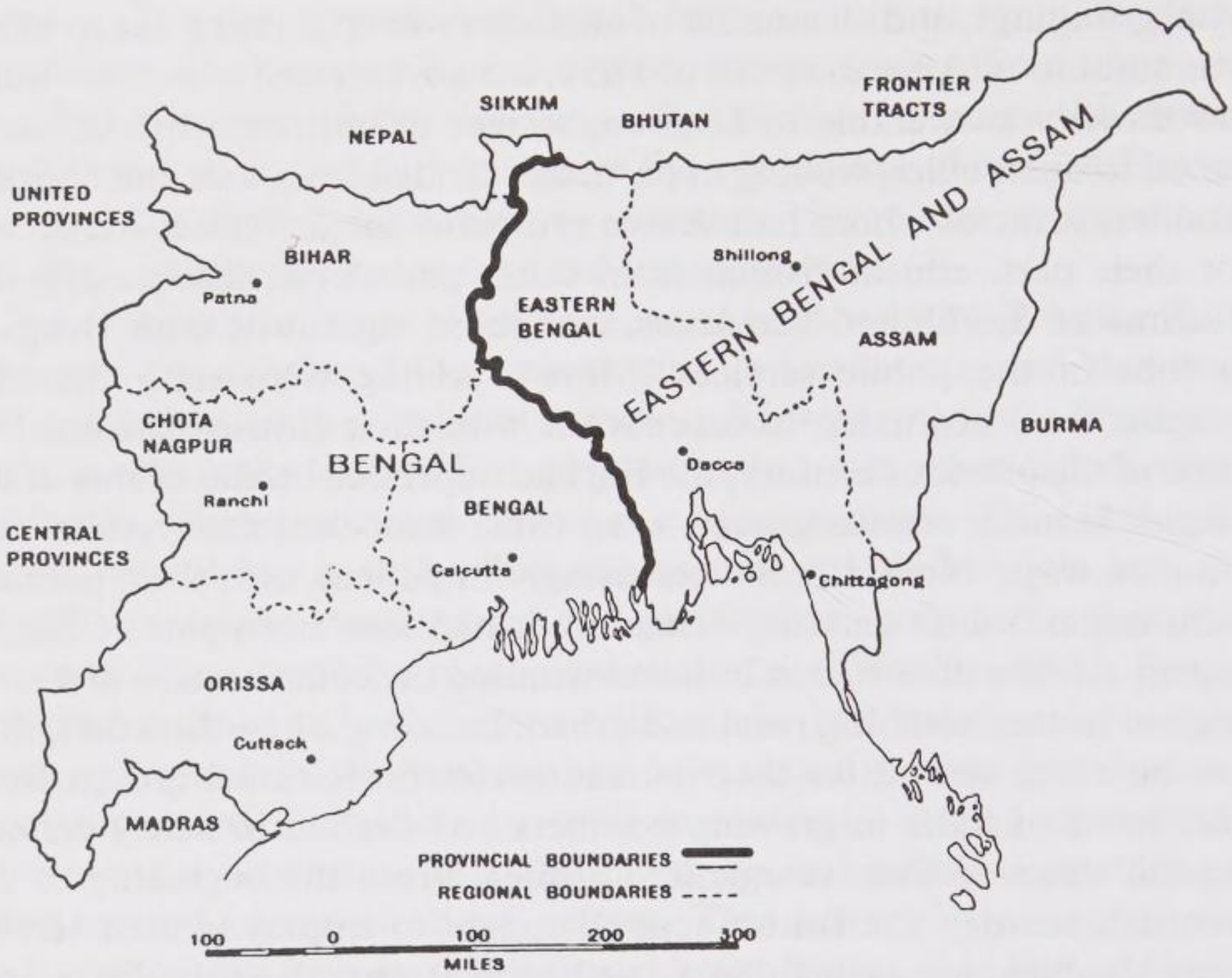
The nineteenth century was the golden age of bhadralok Bengal, which witnessed the height of their prosperity and influence and the most exuberant phase of their cultural flowering. This was when the bhadralok drank deeply at the fonts of European ideas and enthusiastically debated whether to reform their own society in a western mode. They expressed themselves volubly in unfamiliar idioms, not only in English, but in a Bengali vernacular, standardised and enriched as a vehicle for their new purposes. When north India rebelled against the British in 1857, Bengal remained quiescent. In their own politics, the bhadralok eschewed the staves and swords by which scores had been settled in times past. Instead, they propagated their ideas by modern methods, setting up printing presses and newspapers, establishing clubs and political associations which pressed for constitutional reform. They believed themselves to be the fuglemen of a new era, their proud boast being 'what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India will think tomorrow'. Much of this, of course, was froth and fantasy, since the bhadralok never spoke for more than a tiny minority in Bengal. By definition, the province's population consisted mainly not of these small Hindu elites but of much more numerous social groups, whether unlettered Muslim peasants, low castes or tribal peoples. And, of course, even at the height of their influence, such power as the bhadralok enjoyed was always circumscribed by their British overlords, giving them the characteristics and complexes typical of comprador sub-elites elsewhere in the colonial world. Nonetheless, their ambitions grew inexorably. They pressed the British for more and better jobs and a greater say in running both Bengal and India. They played a leading part in setting up the Indian National Congress. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Bengali bhadralok dominated the high ground of India's emerging politics across a broad spectrum of nascent nationalist opinion, whether initially as 'moderates' or later as 'extremists' and even 'terrorists'. If they had an exaggerated sense of their own importance, they could, in these halcyon years, justly claim to have influenced the course of India's history.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, however, the climate of opinion, among both their imperial overlords and their Indian competitors, began to turn against the bhadralok and their interests. Challenges were mounted against them by government and by other

social groupings, and all manner of obstacles were put into place to block their ambitions. After the crisis of 1857, the government of British India, now directly answerable to London, sought to buttress its position. It turned to other allies, wooing in particular landed magnates and Muslim notables, some of whom had shown sympathy for the Great Rebellion. For their part, educated men from other parts of India, notably the Muslims of the United Provinces, competed vigorously with Bengalis for jobs in the public services. More worrying were signs that the Bengalis were beginning to lose favour with their British patrons. For much of the previous century, the Raj had depended on the talents of the Bengali *babus* or service groups, even while it mocked their 'effete' and imitative ways. Now it grew increasingly impatient with their political posturing and their growing demands. It had long been part of British strategy to base their rule in India on winning the collaboration of a wide range of Indian notables, rural and urban. In taking a new direction, they now began to recruit for their bureaucracies professional groups from other parts of India in growing numbers and drafted in newly defined 'martial' races to their reorganised armies. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the British actively sought to employ in their service more Muslims, in north India as well as in Bengal itself. In 1905, in a move which the bhadralok saw as a deliberate attack upon themselves, Curzon partitioned Bengal, making its predominantly Muslim eastern districts the core of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam (see map 0.1).

Curzon's actions provoked a furore in Bengal which in 1911 forced the viceroy of the day to rescind the partition of 1905. In a decision that would return to haunt the Hindu bhadralok who led the vociferous campaign against Curzon's partition, the eastern tracts and their Muslim majorities were restored to Bengal. But the province never recovered its previous size or the standing it had once commanded. In 1911, Bihar and Orissa were taken out of Bengal and made into a separate province in their own right. In 1912, in a move of great significance, the capital of India was transferred from Calcutta to New Delhi. This was an ominous sign that the centre of gravity in India had begun to swing back from the water's margin to the mid-Gangetic plains. Calcutta lost its status as the first city of British India and Bengal its rank as its premier presidency.

Other trends also undermined the privileged position of the bhadralok. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the focus of imperial policy in British India changed, as did the equations of profit and power which once had made India the keystone of Britain's world empire. Even before the First World War exposed the weaknesses of Britain's industrial base and the fragility of its global dominance, the Raj in India was no



0.1 Curzon's partition of Bengal, 1905–1912.

longer the aggressive and expansive force it had been in the nineteenth century. Gradually, its emphasis shifted to hanging on to power, and this called for different, more defensive, strategies. In a bid to cut the costs of running their Indian empire, the British subcontracted the formal governance of the localities and the provinces to their Indian allies. On the local boards and municipalities, and in due course in the provincial councils too, Indians were given a greater say as the elected representatives of particular communities or interest groups. Since the late nineteenth century, India's decennial censuses had counted Britain's Indian subjects and classified them according to religion, community and caste. Now representation in local and provincial institutions came to be doled out to interest groups and communities enumerated and categorised in these novel ways. In the politics of India's localities and provinces, representative institutions now gave a prominence to communities defined by religion and assessed by their demographic weight. Bengal's Hindu leaders had in consequence to face the awkward fact that they spoke only for a minority of the population. As the Raj progressively gave Indians a greater say in running their own affairs, the Hindus of Bengal, who had fought long and hard for these political concessions, discovered that in their own

backyard they had increasingly to defer to Muslim communities with their substantial advantage in numbers.

At the same time, developments in all-India politics conspired to rob Bengal, and indeed other maritime regions, of their pre-eminence on the nationalist stage. In 1920, the Government of India Act devolved considerable powers to the reformed councils and gave elected Indians a more prominent role in the governance of the provinces than they had previously been allowed, while keeping the vital attributes of sovereignty at the centre firmly in British hands. This was also the year of the historic Nagpur session at which Gandhi and his allies captured the all-India Congress and, crucially for bhadralok Bengal, successfully called for non-cooperation with the Raj and a boycott of the new councils. Most of Bengal's Hindu leaders – urbane, westernised and schooled in the constitutional politics of municipalities and corporations – were ill at ease with the Gandhian style of politics. But, more to the point, Gandhi's strategies did not suit their purposes. Non-cooperation and civil disobedience were all very well for politicians who had good prospects of enlisting popular support and with time on their side. By contrast, the Hindu politicians of Bengal had every incentive to take swift and decisive advantage of the 1920 Government of India Act and of the reformed political institutions for which they had long been pressing before others captured these bastions of patronage and power. Chittaranjan Das, one of Hindu Bengal's few great strategists, realised that, to retain their influence, the bhadralok needed to fight elections within the limited franchise of the 1920 reforms, in alliance wherever possible with other communities. During the 1920s, Bengal led the 'Swarajist' assault upon the Gandhians or 'no-changers' in the all-India arena. Under Das's leadership, it helped to defeat Gandhi and the non-cooperators and give Congressmen, in Bengal and in other parts of India, the licence they needed to fight the 1924 elections and to enter the provincial councils.

In the early 1930s, however, Gandhi's challenge to the politics of the old order and of Hindu Bengal returned in a new and insidious guise. In 1934, Gandhi changed the constitution of the Congress to broaden the reach of the party and to strengthen control from the top. These changes further reduced Bengal's influence in all-India politics. In the reorganised Congress, its provincial committees now represented linguistic groupings, not British administrative units. By giving these groupings, in which demographic strength was what counted, the decisive say in electing the All-India Congress Committee, and by making the Working Committee of Congress (which consisted of hardline Gandhians) a much more powerful force in the party than it had been in the past, Gandhi effectively

broke the hold of the maritime provinces over the organisation of the Congress.

In 1932, bhadralok Bengal suffered another setback at the hands of its erstwhile imperial patrons and overlords. McDonald's Communal Award of that year parcelled out the seats in the new provincial assemblies between different communities according to their numbers. This was good news for Muslims in provinces in which they were in a majority, particularly in Bengal and the Punjab. But it was a crushing blow for the Hindus of Bengal, who were reduced by the Award to being a permanent statutory minority in their own province. To add insult to injury, far from rallying to their support to protest against the Award, Gandhi and the all-India Congress forced Bengal's high-caste Hindus to surrender even more ground, declaring that thirty of their much reduced and quite meagre share of seats in the provincial Assembly would be handed to the lower or 'Scheduled' castes. This left high-caste Hindus with only fifty seats, or a mere one-fifth of the total, in the new Assembly of Bengal. In consequence, when at last the new Government of India Act came on to the statute book in 1935, it denied the bhadralok the political dividends they had expected to receive from full provincial autonomy. In the 1937 and subsequent elections, a greatly expanded electorate put into office ministries in Bengal dominated by Muslims. Predictably and deliberately, these ministries sought to pull down the remaining props and pillars of Hindu privilege in the province.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, bhadralok politics reacted negatively to these challenges by becoming inward-looking and defensive. Instead of seeking to fortify such influence as they still had on the all-India stage, Bengal's Hindu leaders struggled to hang on to the remnants of their power and standing on their home turf. A few of them, notably Sarat Chandra Bose, the brother of Subhas, the 'Netaji' or great 'Leader' as he was usually known, urged his fellow Hindus to face reality and make cross-communal alliances with Muslims. But perhaps the moment in history for such tactics had come and gone. Sarat Bose's plan failed to win backing from the Congress high command, which expressly forbade him from taking the Bengal Congress into a coalition ministry of Congressmen and Muslims. Nor, frankly, did Bose's proposals attract much support from other Hindu leaders in Bengal. Feeling ever more beleaguered and isolated, they focused their energies instead on parochial campaigns to preserve their failing ascendancy in the localities, on governing bodies of schools, municipal committees and district boards. But even at these humdrum levels, they were fighting a rearguard battle. Encouraged by their new strength in government, Muslims flexed their muscle in every arena of politics, challenging and undermining Hindu

dominance even in those parts of western Bengal where the rival community had a majority.

While Bengal continued to concentrate on its narrow local preoccupations, events of huge significance were taking place on the all-India stage and in the outside world. In 1939, the Second World War broke out and India was dragged into the conflict by its rulers, its manpower and resources pressed by Britain to underpin its desperate efforts to survive the Axis onslaught. In August 1940, Viceroy Linlithgow announced that no further political concessions would be given to India until its two main communities agreed on the way forward. In this way, quite intentionally, the British gave the Muslims – or rather those claiming to speak for them – a veto on constitutional advance. Just four months earlier, in March 1940, the Muslim League under Jinnah (which had been repudiated at the polls in the 1937 elections) had called, in a resolution ambiguous in every particular, for a sovereign Muslim state of 'Pakistan'. Inevitably Bengal, home to a third of the sub-continent's Muslims, was seen by the League as a vital constituency to give substance to this demand. For its part, the Congress high command had quite a different priority during the war, which was to keep its provincial barons on a tight leash in readiness for a final assault on the bastions of power at the centre. This was planned to take place if possible during the war but more realistically once the war was over. In consequence, when the Bose brothers and their supporters mounted a challenge to the high command in 1939, they were ruthlessly purged from the party, a move which reduced the once-powerful Bengal Congress to a shadow of its former self.

When the Second World War came to an end in 1945, Britain's capacity to hold on to India and its will to do so – tested by the Quit India movement in 1942, by the rebellions of the Indian National Army and the navy, by spiralling unrest in India and above all by the costs of the war – had been broken beyond repair. A Labour government under Attlee decided to get out of India as soon as possible. At a stroke, this decision transformed the political landscape in India. Yesterday's critics, in particular the Congress, were seen by London as today's friends, the most plausible successors to whom Britain's Indian empire could be handed over. As for Jinnah and the League, which had risen phoenix-like during the war to claim to be the sole voice of Muslim India and a convenient counterweight to Congress, in the changed circumstances of the post-war world, became a grave inconvenience in negotiating a swift transfer of power in India.

These negotiations involved three parties: the Congress high command, the Muslim League under Jinnah and the British government in London and New Delhi. In these critical transactions, Hindu spokesmen

from Bengal had no part to play. But they could not ignore what was happening at the centre. The impending transfer of power forced Bengal's Hindu leaders at last to focus on the larger picture. The Cabinet Mission's proposal in May 1946 to give substantial powers to Muslim provinces organised into groups would have bundled Bengal's Hindus into a group dominated by Muslims, thereby condemning them to permanent political and social subordination. In panic, bhadralok circles clutched at a hastily conceived plan to partition Bengal and secure for themselves a much smaller, but separate, state of West Bengal in India where Hindus would be in a majority. In this state, so they hoped, Hindu society would regain its status and dignity and above all the political supremacy which it would have lost irretrievably in an undivided Bengal. After the horrific riots in Calcutta of August 1946 and the retaliatory pogroms launched against Hindus at Noakhali that winter, the campaign for the partition of Bengal gained momentum. Led by the rump of the old Bengal Congress, it was stridently backed by the right-wing nationalist Hindu Mahasabha and won support from a range of vocal Hindu opinion, predominantly from the professional and clerical classes, but also from demobilised soldiers, former terrorists, student volunteers and even the wealthier peasants. Not surprisingly, support for partition came mainly from people in the Hindu-majority districts of western Bengal. For his part, Sarat Bose tried to resist the campaign for partition by a last-ditch plan, devised together with certain powerful Muslim leaders, to take a sovereign united Bengal out of both India and Pakistan. But he failed to win the support of his co-religionists in Bengal, and Delhi would have none of it.

In the end, Bengal's future was settled not in the province but in Delhi. Its Hindu elites, weakened, divided and demoralised, had little hope of influencing their all-India leaders on a decision as crucial as the partition of the sub-continent. But, by a chance concatenation of factors that gave Bengal's Hindu leaders the opening they needed, the Congress high command opted for the partition of India for quite different reasons of their own. The leaders of the all-India Congress were convinced that, in order to hold the country together after the British departed, independent India must have a strong centre. In their view, post-war India was staring into the abyss of a disastrous social and political breakdown. To avoid catastrophe, the Congress high command wanted a swift transfer of power to a strong central government, firmly under its control. The Muslim League's demands for group autonomy and parity at the centre were seen by Congress as the main obstacle to achieving this goal. After the League entered the interim government in late 1946, Congress found itself frustrated at every turn in making crucial decisions or deploying the

resources for their implementation. Time was when Congress had implacably opposed India's partition. But in the early months of 1947, having learnt by experience what sharing power with the League at the centre entailed, and with the date of Britain's withdrawal coming ever closer, the Congress high command fundamentally reconsidered its position. On 8 March 1947, the Congress Working Committee announced that, if India was to be partitioned (which it now implicitly accepted as inevitable), the Muslim-majority provinces of Bengal and the Punjab would also have to be divided. In this way, the high command let it be known that it had plumped for a limited partition of India. Once it had arrived at this historic conclusion, it did not take the Congress bosses long to persuade Mountbatten and Attlee, who were eager to ensure Britain's swift exit from India, that partition on their terms was the only way forward.

In these ways, for a fateful moment in 1947, Delhi's purposes dovetailed fortuitously but neatly with the plans of those Hindus in Bengal who wanted to partition their province. This chance conjuncture gave the Hindus of Bengal what they were after: the partition of their province and a Hindu-dominated, albeit truncated, state of West Bengal. On 3 June 1947, Attlee announced that the British would quit India in ten weeks' time. On 15 August 1947, power would be transferred from the British Indian empire to two successor states, India and Pakistan. The provinces in which the majority of India's Muslims lived, Bengal and the Punjab, would also be divided. Contiguous districts in Bengal and the Punjab with Muslim majorities would be given to Pakistan. The remainder of these provinces, with their non-Muslim majorities, would remain in India.

At this point, most histories of India's partition have brought the curtain down, assuming that once the big issue which had dominated Indian politics for more than a decade had been conclusively settled, all that remained was to determine the nuts and bolts of the machinery to implement that fateful decision. In contrast, this book takes as its starting point the 3 June decision of Attlee's government. It investigates the consequences of partitioning an empire which for so long had been ruled under a unitary form of government. Implementing partition, as soon became clear, was no simple matter. Most Muslims in the Punjab lived in its western districts and most Muslims in Bengal lived in the east of the province. But there were many Hindus and Sikhs in the western Punjab and many Hindus in eastern Bengal. Unstitching complex communal fabrics, whose weaving began long ago on the looms of history, proved to be a difficult and dangerous business. Long before the frontiers were drawn on the maps and staked out on the ground, everyone could

see that the principle of contiguous communal majorities would not produce uncontentious lines of division. Nor was it self-evident that partition would deliver the political stability and social concord that it was intended to achieve. This study investigates how the two new states carved out of the old undivided province of Bengal came to take the shape they did, and explores the irreversible changes, both social and political, which partition set into motion.

Part I

Hopes and fears

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

Giuseppe de Lampedusa, *The Leopard*

We have now a homogenous country, though our frontiers have shrunk.

K. M. Munshi, 14 July 1947, Constituent Assembly of India

1 The devil in the detail: new borders for a new state

Attlee's statement of 3 June heralded success for the coalition of Bengal's Hindu leaders who, in the last years of the Raj, had campaigned so vigorously for the partition of their province. By decisions taken in London and in Delhi, they had won for themselves a Hindu state inside India which would be in place before the end of the monsoon. With this prize in imminent prospect, the leaders of the Hindu coalition had to turn their attention to the practical details of converting, by mid-August, their idea of a Hindu homeland into reality.

The triumphalist euphoria of the Hindu leadership, when they were faced with this daunting task, quickly gave way to more sober-sided calculations. Large questions now had to be addressed and swiftly answered. In practice, what Hindu state could be successfully carved out of old Bengal? What balance of people and territories should the new homeland ideally possess? Where should its borders be? And, most importantly, how could the would-be leaders ensure that they would get to run the new state of West Bengal? Once these questions came urgently to be considered, it became clear that the answers were interconnected and would have far-reaching implications for the new state. Evidently, the physical frontiers of the new state would bear critically upon who would run it, and defining the citizens of the new polity was the key factor in making sure that the social groups that the coalition represented would dominate it.

How the leaders of the campaign for Hindu Bengal approached and answered these difficult questions has been little understood. Few have challenged the assumption that the Boundary Award was the work of one man, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, and imposed upon Bengal by fiat from above.[1]

[1] This view of Radcliffe's role in 'the task of settling the fate of millions' has been part of the popular history of partition ever since Auden's famous poem 'Partition' was published, but recent historical studies have not challenged it. See, for instance, Gyanesh Kudaisya and Tai Yong Tan, *The aftermath of the partition of South Asia*, London and New York, 2000, pp. 83, 100; and Tai Yong Tan, 'Sir Cyril goes to India. Partition, boundary-making and disruptions in the Punjab', *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, 4, 1 (1997).

Instead of examining who wanted what borders in 1947 and why, historians have been content to accept an anodyne narrative of the last days of the Raj in which Indian politicians, like Radcliffe himself, muddled through the details in their haste to meet Mountbatten's improbable deadlines, and in which the peoples of Bengal and the Punjab were mere pawns in the endgames of empire. Yet this is a caricature of what really happened. The politicians who pressed for partition made vigorous and successful efforts to shape the borders of their new state, and they did so in pursuit of clear goals.

Like all caricatures, of course, this one contains some elements of truth. It is true that the ten weeks from 3 June to 17 August, when Radcliffe's line was announced, had an Alice-in-Wonderland quality about them, in which the enormous implications of partition were buried beneath the sheer volume of petty detail. There were no precedents and no blueprints for how to divide a country which for so long had been governed as a unitary state. Procedures for partition had to be contrived and instantly put into effect, and inevitably there was a large element of extemporisation about them. Wrangling about who was to get what – the waters of the sub-continent's rivers, its roads and bridges, railways and rolling stock, and all the paraphernalia of government, right down to typewriters and files – inevitably took up much of the little time that was available.[2]

It is also a fact that London and Delhi laid down most of the ground rules for partition, and that in the framing of these rules metropolitan and all-India objectives trumped provincial preoccupations. London decreed that the Bengal legislature was to divide itself into two sections, one consisting of the members elected by districts in which Muslims were a majority and the other by members from Hindu-majority districts. If a majority in either section voted for partition, Bengal would be divided.[3] Consequently, on 20 June 1947, the Bengal Assembly duly divided itself into two sections and voted on partition. In this historic vote, most of the representatives in the 'Hindu' section voted for partition and, equally predictably, the Muslims voted overwhelmingly to keep Bengal undivided.[4] According to the procedure which had been decreed from on

[2] As one participant wryly commented, meetings of the provincial Partition Committees seemed like 'a Peace Conference with a new war in sight': [Punjab] Governor's Appreciation dated 12 July 1947, in N. Mansergh and E.N.R. Lumby (eds.), *Constitutional relations between Britain and India. The transfer of power, 1942–1947*, London, 1970–1983 (henceforth *TP*), vol. XII, enclosure to No. 81, p. 120.

[3] 'Statement by His Majesty's Government, dated the 3rd June 1947', *Partition Proceedings* (6 vols.), Government of India Press, New Delhi, 1949, vol. I, p. 2 (henceforth *PP* followed by volume and page numbers).

[4] The provisional West Bengal Legislative Assembly resolved, by 58 to 21 votes, that the province should be partitioned and that West Bengal should join India's Constituent

high, later that same evening the Bengal Legislature divided into two parts, one consisting of representatives of Muslim-majority districts and the other of those from the Hindu districts. Each section was deemed to constitute a separate provisional assembly, one for Muslim 'East Bengal' and the other for Hindu 'West Bengal'.

The next stages too were laid down by Delhi. On 29 June, the high commands of the Muslim League and the Congress agreed that the League Ministry in Bengal should continue in office until independence, but with powers to legislate only for the Muslim districts of 'East Bengal'. For his part, the leader of the Bengal Congress Assembly Party was instructed by the high command to nominate a parallel 'shadow cabinet' which had the responsibility, in the brief interim period of six weeks until 15 August, of running the districts which were to constitute Hindu 'West Bengal'. On 15 August, by diktat of the viceroy Lord Mountbatten, power would be transferred into Indian hands and the two parts of Bengal would go their separate ways.[5]

Mountbatten also decreed that a Boundary Commission was to get swiftly down to work and come to rapid conclusions about the frontiers separating the two parts of Bengal. He laid down the timetables according to which the business of partition was to be completed, and these unlikely deadlines contributed to the prevailing air of unreality. By 15 August, the province's administrative assets and liabilities had to be shared out between east and west. To achieve these monumental tasks in such short order, Bengal was to set up a 'Separation Council' chaired by the governor, Sir Frederick Burrows, and assisted by four members, two nominated by the Congress and two by the Muslim League.[6] On 26 June 1947, just over three weeks after London's announcement on 3 June, the Separation Council began its task of unstitching Bengal's once unified administration into two separate parts.[7] The departmental committees were instructed to begin and finish their work in less than a

Assembly. At a separate meeting later on the same day, members of the East Bengal Assembly voted against partition by 106 to 35: Burrows to Mountbatten, telegram dated 20 June 1947, *TP* XI, No. 278, p. 536.

[5] Note entitled 'Arrangements re. Shadow Cabinet for West Bengal', 29 June 1947, All-India Congress Committee Papers, Second Instalment, File Number PB-3(I)/1948 (henceforth AICC-II, PB-3(I)/1948).

[6] On the Separation Council, Suhrwardy and Nazimuddin represented the Muslim League, and Nalini Ranjan Sarkar and D. N. Mukherjee the Congress. See Saroj Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy and other chief ministers. A record up to 1962*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 41; Sir G. Abell to Mr Turnbull, telegram dated 8 July 1947, *TP* XII, No. 16, pp. 16–17. In its turn, the Separation Council had five sub-committees dealing with organisation, records and personnel; assets and liabilities; budget and accounts; controls; and contracts. In addition, twenty-five departmental committees were set up with a steering committee to ensure liaison between the Separation Council and this plethora of sub-committees.

[7] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 41.

month, by 21 July. The main Separation Council was given an extra five days' grace and ordered to get everything finalised by 26 July, less than three weeks before Bengal was divided on the ground.[8] This required both sides to keep their nerve in the division of the spoils. If partition was to pay off for the Hindus who had pressed for it, they had to fight to win every resource to which they could lay claim, and inevitably the two sides engaged in a frantic competition to grab whatever they could. Since the provincial separation councils had to work within broad guidelines from Delhi, arm-wrestling within the Bengal Separation Council usually hinged on how these guidelines were to be interpreted and how much latitude they gave the two sides.[9] On 30 July 1947, when the viceroy met the members of the Bengal Separation Council at Government House in Calcutta, he was forced to recognise that the two sides would not agree on many of the infinitely complex details which had to be decided by 15 August.[10] So he ruled that questions that remained undetermined by 15 August were to be referred to an 'Arbitral Tribunal', to be sorted out in the fullness of time. In the interim, 'standstill agreements', effective until 31 March 1948, would be put into place. As the governor of the Punjab, Sir Evan Jenkins, acerbically noted, this '[did] not really solve the administrative problem'.[11] It made already grave problems worse by dangerously prolonging uncertainty in the volatile last days of the Raj.

It is also indisputable that Bengal was partitioned in circumstances of administrative chaos and political uncertainty. The leadership of the Bengal Congress – essentially a feeble rump of the old firm, long excluded from playing any part in governance – had somehow or other quickly to stamp its authority on the administration of the western part of the province, while at the same time achieving the new state it wanted. If Bengal had had a good working administration capable of overseeing the

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[9] Delhi used a rough-and-ready procedure for sharing out the assets of British India between the two successor states of India and Pakistan. The provinces which were to be partitioned were told to follow similar guidelines. In Bengal, the very first row in the Separation Council erupted over the basic question of what comprised 'assets and liabilities'. For example, were resources such as roads, rivers, bridges and forests to be considered assets? The Muslim League appointees saw them as assets; the Congress appointees did not; and the matter was discussed and adjourned. Next came the thorny matter, on which there was much acrimonious debate, of whether the side in whose territory assets happened to fall after partition had the right to hold on to enough for its needs, or whether these assets also had to be shared on a pro-rata basis. Another question was how assets were to be valued. Was the book value or some other measure to be taken as the basis for settlement? See *ibid.*, pp. 43–4.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 42. Also see 'Minutes of the Viceroy's Twenty-Fourth Miscellaneous meeting' on 30 July 1947, in *TP* XII, No. 287, pp. 416–21.

[11] *TP* XII, No. 287, pp. 416–21.

overwhelming business of partition, these tasks might have been more manageable. But this was not the case. Government employees, both in the central and provincial services, had been given the choice to 'opt' for service either under India or under Pakistan[12] and were allowed a generous six months in which to make up their minds. As a result, in no single department of state was there any certainty about who was in charge, who would remain in charge in India and who would cross over to Pakistan. It followed that no one in the administration was prepared to take serious decisions. In Bengal, this ambiguity was compounded by the fact that the provincial administration had been seriously weakened by war and demoralised by political interference.[13] Critically, West Bengal's shadow cabinet did not have a police force upon which it could rely, since all the senior officers had been selected by Muslim League governments.[14] Nor did the shadow cabinet believe that they could trust Muslim civil servants, and they insisted that those who opted for Pakistan should immediately give up their posts in the West Bengal administration.[15] Yet the loyalty and support of Hindu officers could not be depended upon either. The Congress had a long history of antipathy towards colonial bureaucrats, whom they tended to regard as quislings working for imperial overlords, and for their part the civil servants had returned the compliment, having little time for politicians. Indeed, when the fifty-nine senior Hindu civil servants met to consider their prospects under the new regime, many had grave doubts whether they would serve the new government.[16] This handful of mandarins – dispirited, disgruntled and uncertain about their future – were now required as a body to divide the administration and at the same time continue to run a massively disrupted province.

Another urgent problem that faced the Hindu leadership was to identify who was to be the head of the new government of West Bengal. Delhi had ruled that 'West Bengal' was to have a shadow cabinet, but left it to the Bengalis to decide who was to be its chief minister. There was no

[12] *Ibid.* See also S. M. Rai, *Partition of the Punjab: A study of its effects on the politics and administration of the Punjab, 1947–1956*, New York, 1957.

[13] Sanjoy Bhattacharya, *Propaganda and information in eastern India 1939–1945. A necessary weapon of war*, Richmond upon Thames, 2001, pp. 17–44.

[14] Nehru, after a 'long talk' with Dr Prafulla Ghosh, urged Mountbatten to send 'three or four additional Indian battalions' to Calcutta and transfer the 'Punjabi Musalman' battalions, about whose behaviour there had been 'serious complaints', out of Calcutta 'to East Bengal or some other place in Pakistan': Nehru to Mountbatten, 21 July 1947, *TP* XII, No. 194, pp. 283–4.

[15] These concerns lay behind Prafulla Ghosh's request, which Nehru sent on to Mountbatten, that 'officers who have chosen Pakistan for their future activities should have nothing further to do with West Bengal areas. Their continual [*sic*] retention in West Bengal and Calcutta only leads to friction': *ibid.*

[16] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 45.

obvious candidate and a consensus proved difficult to contrive. The fissures and cracks in that coalition, temporarily papered over during the campaign for partition of Bengal, quickly re-emerged now that the alliance had achieved its goal. The 'West Bengal' section of the divided Assembly was dominated by the Congress, so it was clear that the 'official' Bengal Congress would form the new ministry. But within that inherently unstable Congress grouping, there were many claimants for the top job, and none was clearly ahead of the others. In the event, a follower of Gandhi from East Bengal, Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh – scholar, chemist and former assay master of the Calcutta Mint – got the post of premier, but only as a stopgap appointment. Ghosh had belatedly been elected leader of the Congress Assembly Party just one week earlier, after his main rival for the position, Surendra Mohan Ghosh, had been persuaded by the Congress high command not to contest the election.[17] Rather like Malvolio, then, Dr Ghosh had the premiership thrust upon him without the consensus that would have given him some security of tenure. No sooner had he taken office than factions began to sharpen their knives to cut him out of his uncertain overlordship of the new government.

Smoke and mirrors: 'schemes' and 'plans' for West Bengal

It was thus admittedly against a backdrop of administrative confusion and political in-fighting that Bengal's Hindu leadership turned their attention to the question of what borders their new state should have. They had chosen Ghosh to be their premier-in-waiting in a hurry and under pressure from the centre, and everyone knew that he could be ejected from office quite as swiftly as he had been appointed. But the shape of the frontier, once decided, could not be undone. Decisions with far-reaching and irreversible consequences needed to be made, and difficult choices weighed up. However much their transactions were characterised by extemporisation and haste, and notwithstanding the chaotic circumstances in which they were made, Bengal's leaders did indeed make these hard and careful decisions in the summer of 1947.

The broad framework within which these frontiers were to be settled was decided, once again, at Olympian levels far away from Bengal. But there was a critical difference. The rules laid down by London and Delhi – perhaps deliberately – allowed scope for the provincial politicians in West Bengal and the Punjab to influence the lie of the frontier. The Boundary

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 46. Prafulla Ghosh enjoyed the confidence of the president of the All-India Congress, Acharya Kripalani. For more details, see chapter 5 in this book.

Commissions of Bengal and the Punjab consisted of panels of four judges, with Radcliffe in the chair in each case. But all the judges were party-political appointees nominated by the Congress and the Muslim League.[18] The 'official' Bengal Congress naturally chose judges upon whom it could rely to serve on the Bengal Boundary Commission. For their part, these two judges – Justices B. K. Mukherjea and C. C. Biswas – abandoned any pretence of judicial impartiality and loyally presented the Congress's case to the commission and its chair.[19] These procedures ensured that the key political leaders were able to make their views about the borders abundantly clear to Radcliffe. Despite the fact that the Bengal Boundary Commission examined a large number of witnesses,[20] Radcliffe, who had been absent during its sittings, made his Award after evaluating only those claims and counterclaims put forward by the quartet of judges representing the two main parties – the Congress-led 'Central Coordination Committee' and the Muslim League.[21]

For its part, the Congress high command in Delhi decided to stand back as far as possible from the work of the Boundary Commission, and chose not to get involved in the details of the new borders of Bengal and the Punjab. Having made it clear that under no circumstances could it countenance Calcutta going to Pakistan, the high command left its provincial satraps to settle upon the precise line of the frontier they wanted for West Bengal and to argue their case before Radcliffe's commission. Some all-India politicians considered this *laissez-faire* policy to be a potentially disastrous abdication of responsibility. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, leader of the Scheduled Castes, warned of the grave dangers of the centre treating 'the problem as if it was a local problem, to be left for the people of the Punjab and Bengal to fight out for themselves'. An eminent lawyer and

[18] Viceroy's Seventeenth Personal Report, 16 August 1947, *TP* XII, No. 489, p. 758. For a discussion of how and why the commission came to take this form, see Joya Chatterji, 'The fashioning of a frontier. The Radcliffe line and Bengal's border landscape, 1947–1952', *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 1 (1999), pp. 190–5.

[19] The 'Report of Non-Muslim Members', *PP* VI, pp. 29–59, faithfully followed the line of the Congress in its *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission* (filed on 17 July 1947), AICC-I, CL-14(D)/1947–48. The same pattern was seen in the Punjab Boundary Commission, where the judges stuck to the party line. See Lucy Payne Chester, 'Drawing the Indo-Pakistani boundary during the 1947 partition of South Asia', Yale University, doctoral dissertation, 2002, p. 58.

[20] As Oscar Spate, the Australian geographer and expert adviser to the Muslim League in the Punjab, laconically reported, 'in Bengal ... 36 lawyers presented 36 cases and a further 71 had to be told no time (trust Bengal to talk!)': O. H. K. Spate, Lahore diary (entry for 26 July 1947), O. H. K. Spate Papers, Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge.

[21] *PP* VI, pp. 29–115. For further details on the Bengal Boundary Commission, see J. Chatterji, 'The fashioning of a frontier'.

politician in his own right and a key figure in drafting India's constitution, Ambedkar reminded India's leaders that 'the maintenance of the frontier [would] not be the responsibility of the East Punjab or West Bengal [but] of the Government of India', and that, in consequence, the governments of India and Pakistan were 'the proper and necessary' parties to make the case before the Boundary Commission. The Defence Department of the government of India should, in Ambedkar's view, have insisted that military officers serve on the Boundary Commission as assessors. But his advice was ignored. Not only did the Defence Department fail to insist on having assessors on the commission, it did not even 'care to appear before the . . . Commission to present the case'.[22] The high command doubtless calculated that risks to the future defence of India notwithstanding, it was wiser for central government to remain aloof from the work of the Boundary Commissions. Whatever precise frontiers were finally decided, they would inevitably be hugely unpopular. In the case of the Punjab, they were certain to be violently condemned by most of Congress's constituents in the West Punjab, Hindus and Sikhs alike. Like Mountbatten himself, the Congress high command decided that it was politic to take convenient cover behind Radcliffe. Faced with increasingly desperate appeals from the Punjab's Sikhs and Hindus, they simply refused to get involved. When a leading Bengali Congressman, Nalinakshya Sanyal, asked repeatedly to see Dr Rajendra Prasad to discuss issues concerning West Bengal's borders, he was snubbed and sent away without a chance to have his say. Prasad told him bluntly, 'the decision of the Commission will be final and binding on all parties. It will not be referred to us for any change. *I do not think any useful purpose will be served by any of your friends coming here for this purpose.*'[23]

The high command's calculated decision to stand back paradoxically gave Bengal's Hindu politicians, very much the weak provincial placemen of an overweening centre, the chance to negotiate the eastern frontier between India and Pakistan. So, in fact, they had far more latitude than is usually realised to argue for the precise borders for West Bengal that made sense from their provincial perspective. When he drew the new frontier between the two Bengals, Radcliffe accepted many of the claims of the provincial Congress. The debates in Hindu circles about the right

[22] Characteristically, he made these points publicly in a statement in Delhi on 20 July 1947: 'Partition of the Punjab and Bengal is an all-India problem', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 22 July 1947. That the central Congress leadership took note of his views is evident because Dr Rajendra Prasad, the Congress president, annotated a cutting of this particular press report: Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1-B/47. They chose, however, to ignore Ambedkar's opinion.

[23] Rajendra Prasad to Nalinakshya Sanyal, 31 July 1947, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1-B/47 (emphasis added).

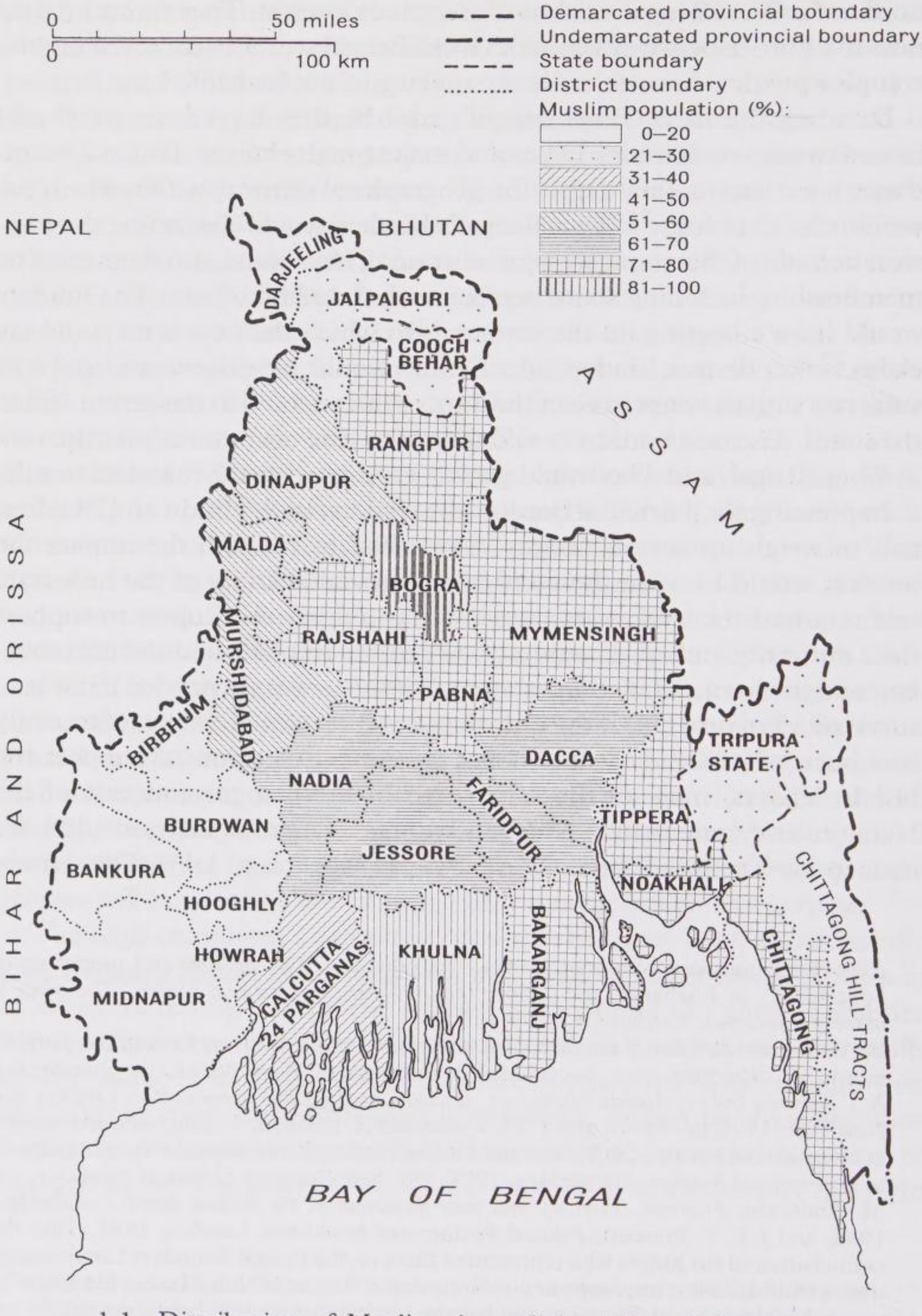
borders for West Bengal are thus of enormous interest. They throw light on how the border between East and West Bengal was settled, revealing the complex political inwardness in the making of the Radcliffe Line.

Deciding the lie of West Bengal's new borders forced the provincial bosses to address intricate issues and make tough choices. Political boundaries are coercive: they define the geographical territory within which the writ of the state runs.[24] West Bengal's borders would determine the physical bounds of the new state's jurisdiction. They would also determine its membership, including some persons and excluding others. The borders would have a bearing on the resources to which the new state could lay claim.[25] Residents of independent India would be citizens and not just subjects, with the right to elect their governments both at the centre and in the states. The new borders would thus prescribe who would have the vote in West Bengal, and who would give its governments the mandate to rule.

In pressing for particular borders the leaders, both Hindu and Muslim, had to weigh up several factors. Some had to do with the impact the borders would have on the political and social stability of the new state and required the leaders to assess who could be relied upon to support their authority and who could not. Other criteria had to do with resources, and the hard calculations about what the new state needed if it was to survive and to prosper. If the only decisive factor for inclusion of territory had been whether its people could be depended upon to support the Hindu leaders, most of the area north of the Ganges and east of the Nadia river system, where Muslims were in a large majority, would have had to be excluded from West Bengal (see map 1.1). The Hindu

[24] Allen Buchanan and Margaret Moore, 'Introduction. The making and unmaking of boundaries', in Buchanan and Moore (eds.), *States, nations and borders. The ethics of making boundaries*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 2.

[25] Borders in modern times are discussed in Paul Nugent, 'Arbitrary lines in the people's minds. A dissenting view on colonial boundaries in West Africa', in Nugent and A. I. Asiwaju (eds.), *African boundaries. Barriers, conduits and opportunities*, London and New York, 1996, pp. 35–67, and T. M. Wilson and H. Donnan, 'Nation, state and identity at international borders', in Wilson and Donnan (eds.), *Border identities. Nation and state at international frontiers*, Cambridge, 1998. On their changing historical character, see M. Anderson, *Frontiers. Territory and state formation in the modern world*, Cambridge, 1996, and J. R. V. Prescott, *Political frontiers and boundaries*, London, 1987. That the politicians, and the judges who represented them on the Bengal Boundary Commission, were mindful of these implications is clear from the 'Report of Non-Muslim Members' in which Mukherjea and Biswas reminded the chairman that 'the boundary will be an international boundary, separating two sovereign independent states. Such [a] boundary marks the limits of the region within which a State can exercise its sovereign authority, and with its location, various matters relating to immigration and restriction on visitors, imposition of customs duties and prevention of smuggling and contraband trade are bound up ... In addition to these peacetime functions, the requirements of military defence will have to be considered.' See 'Report of the Non-Muslim Members', *PP* VI, p. 35.



1.1 Distribution of Muslims in undivided Bengal, by district, 1931 (*Census of India, 1931*, vol. V, part I).

bhadralok had, after all, called for Bengal to be partitioned because they saw no future for themselves in a Muslim-majority province. In demanding a state of their own, they had made the historic choice of rejecting the political strategy of working in partnership with Muslim majorities. If tracts of land in which Muslims were in a large majority were retained in West Bengal, the very logic of that choice would have been fatally compromised. However, if all the areas where Muslims were a dominant presence were cut out of the new province, this would have left only eight districts of south-central Bengal – Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah, Calcutta, the 24 Parganas, Bankura, Midnapore and Birbhum – in West Bengal. These districts had been at the forefront of the Hindu campaign for partition,[26] and they saw themselves as the political heart of the new state. But would these districts be capable of standing on their own feet, or would they need resources from other areas less obviously amenable to control by the Hindu leadership? And, if other, less politically pliable territories were needed by the new state for economic reasons, what resources were sufficiently vital to make it worthwhile to dilute political control in order to get them?

Yet another criterion had to do with the defence, broadly construed, of the frontiers. Ideally, the new border would be sufficiently distant from key strategic points to enable them to be securely protected from encroachment or invasion. This meant identifying strategic points, whether cities, bridges, railheads, headwaters or factories, and deciding how far away from the frontiers they needed to be in order to be capable of being defended.

These intricate matters had to be settled swiftly. Yet one abiding difficulty in making decisions was the paucity and unreliability of the information available. The Muslim League took advantage of its incumbency in office to deny its Hindu rivals access to such up-to-date, detailed and moderately accurate records as the government of Bengal had in its possession. As the Hindu judges on the Boundary Commission complained, government had never made public the facts and figures it held for unions and villages, and the ministry flatly refused every request from the Congress or its agents for the unpublished information, census figures and maps in its hands.[27] Those who made the Hindu case for West

[26] Of these eight Hindu-majority districts, only Birbhum was not strident in its support for the partition campaign: J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 240–59.

[27] Thereafter, as the judges noted, 'the Secretary of the Indian Statistical Institute had approached the Director of Land Records for the unpublished census figures some time in the last week of June, 1947, but the Director of Land Records refused to supply these figures on the ground that census records were not public documents. It appears that the Director made a reference to the Hon'ble Member, Board of Revenue . . . and was told that these figures could not be supplied to the public. He was further directed not to supply any maps prepared in his office on the basis of census figures to any private party or any public organisation': 'Report of the Non-Muslim Members', *PP* VI, p. 32.

Bengal's borders thus had to base their submissions on sketchy, imperfect and out-of-date maps[28] and on the published, but notoriously unsafe, wartime census figures of 1941. But even though the task was enormously complex, the time to do it in improbably short and the resources at their disposal hopelessly inadequate, the would-be leaders of West Bengal had nevertheless to tackle these questions head-on and decide, once and for all, where they wanted its frontiers to run.

These issues were thrashed out in the Hindu 'Central Coordination Committee'. On it was represented every key political grouping that had joined the alliance to press for the partition of Bengal. They included the 'official' Bengal Congress, made up of men who had remained loyal to the high command when the Bose brothers had rebelled against it, as well as the Hindu Mahasabha, the Indian Association and the New Bengal Association.[29] Atul Chandra Gupta, barrister and *de facto* leader of the Congress camp on the committee, was its chairman. But the representatives of the three smaller parties had ten members on the twelve-member committee, while the Congress had only two, an arrangement which was guaranteed to cause trouble.

The remit of the Bengal Boundary Commission was to 'demarcate the boundaries of the two parts of [the province] on the basis of ascertaining contiguous majority areas of Muslims and non-Muslims', with the rider that account be taken also of 'other factors'.[30] In arguing their corner, the Muslim League and the Hindu Coordination Committee both used this ambiguous clause about 'other factors' to demand territory which could not plausibly have been claimed as being contiguous majority areas. The Hindu side, however, was not of one mind on the question of how much extra territory should be fought for through the deployment of the 'other factors' argument. The sharp internal differences that arose inside the Coordination Committee are as significant as its unanimous rejection of the Muslim League's counterclaims.[31] They reveal the many conflicting agendas behind the apparent concord in the cause of West Bengal.

[28] The quality of maps in the public domain was poor, and their scale far too large to provide the close detail that a reliable exercise in delimitation required. In the end, the Hindu team had to turn to scholars for the information they needed. A Calcutta geographer, S. P. Chatterjee, gave them such material as he had (for more on Chatterjee, see n. 83). Even the map on which Radcliffe marked out his line was on the less-than-generous scale of 1 inch to 50 miles; see Chester, 'Drawing the Indo-Pakistani boundary'.

[29] The New Bengal Association was formed towards the end of 1946 to agitate for the partition of Bengal: Government of [West] Bengal Intelligence Branch (hereafter GB IB), File No. 1009–47.

[30] 'Statement by His Majesty's Government, dated the 3rd June 1947', *PP* I, p. 2.

[31] The claims and counterclaims put to the Bengal Boundary Commission are discussed in J. Chatterji, 'The fashioning of a frontier'.

The nub of the matter was how large the new state of West Bengal needed to be to satisfy its protagonists and at the same time to be economically viable. On this critical question, the alliance which had pressed for partition proved to have different and sometimes diametrically opposed opinions. The 'maximalist' view was that the state should be as large as could possibly be contrived. At the other end of the spectrum, the 'minimalists' argued that the new state should be as small and as compact as possible. Disagreements tended to follow the fault lines of party politics. The smaller parties made the largest claims. The Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association wanted the Coordination Committee to demand as much territory as it could, blatantly stretching the terms of the 'other factors' clause to bolster their claims. In addition to eleven Hindu-majority districts,[32] they wanted West Bengal to have two Muslim-majority districts, Malda and Murshidabad, in their entirety, as well as large chunks of other districts where Muslims happened to be more numerous than Hindus.[33] If the Mahasabha and New Bengal Association had had their way, the new state of West Bengal would have kept roughly three-fifths of undivided Bengal, taking in large tracts of territory in which Muslims were a majority (see map 1.2).[34]

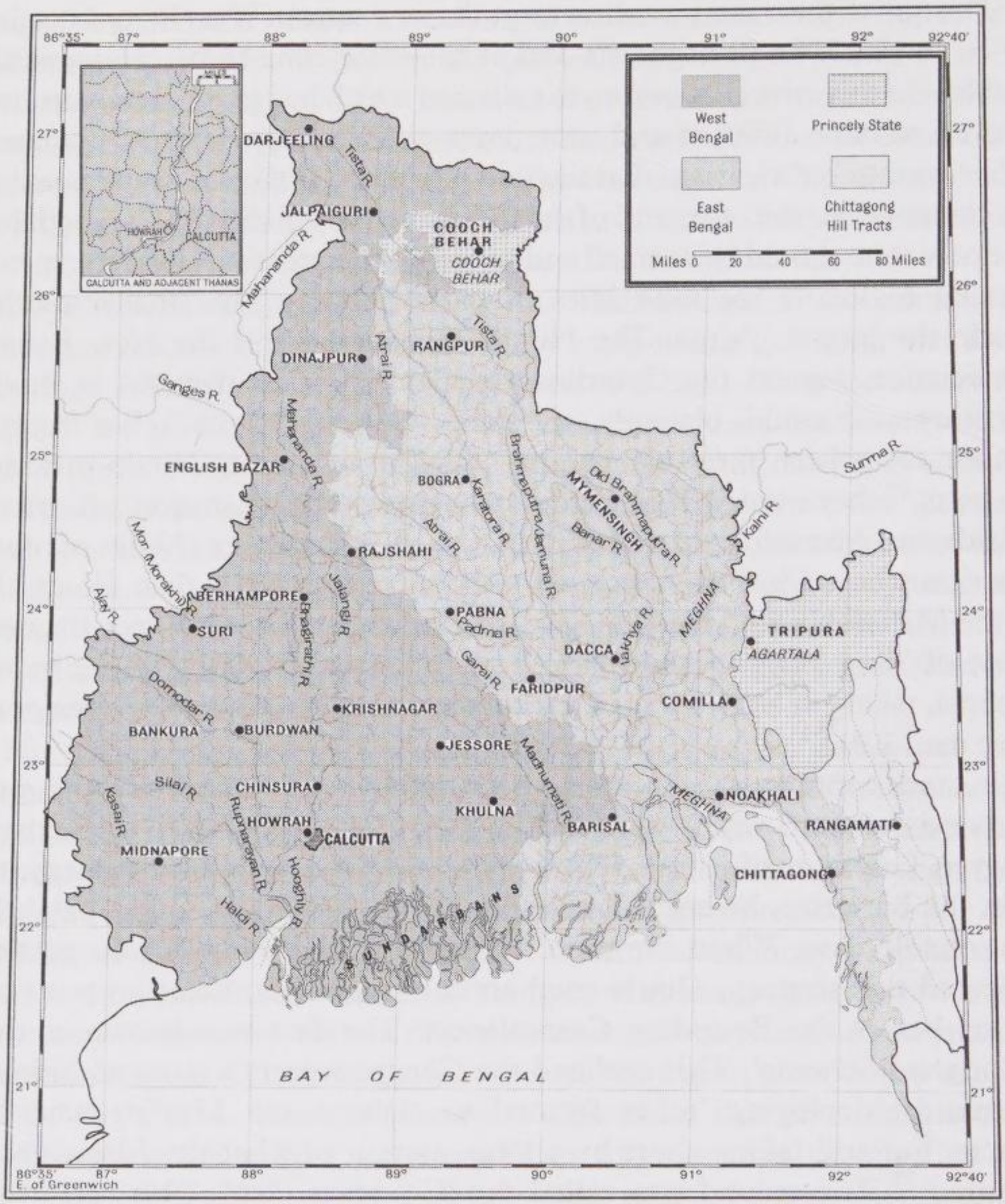
In stark contrast, the Congress camp, led by Atul Chandra Gupta, put forward demands which were strikingly modest. As behoved a practised lawyer, Gupta justified this self-denying ordinance as sound strategy: to win the big prize, he argued, the Hindu side had to present a patently reasonable case. When the representatives of the other Hindu parties rejected this strategy, Gupta tried another tack. He offered to put two plans before the Boundary Commission. The first was known as the 'Congress Scheme'. This outlined the Congress party's more ambitious demands, deploying 'other factors' to claim some Muslim-majority tracts, but still falling short by a large margin of what the Mahasabha wanted.[35] The second was called the 'Congress Plan'. This was even

[32] Burdwan, Midnapore, Birbhum, Bankura, Howrah, Hooghly, Calcutta, the 24 Parganas, Khulna, Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri.

[33] They claimed large swathes of Nadia, Faridpur and Dinajpur, and selected thanas in Rangpur and Rajshahi.

[34] *Memorandum for the Bengal Boundary Commission. Submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association*, Dr S. P. Mookerjee Papers (henceforth SPM Papers), 1st Instalment, Printed Material, File No. 17 (Serial No. 8).

[35] The Mahasabha, for example, demanded the whole of Malda, which was a Muslim-majority district. By contrast, the Congress Scheme left out its claim to five eastern thanas in Malda. The Mahasabha wanted all of Jessore; the Congress asked only for those parts of Jessore that lay to the west of the river Gorai. In Rajshahi, the Mahasabha asked for three thanas; the Congress Scheme wanted only one – Boalia. See the *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission* (filed on 17 July 1947), AICC-I, CL-14(D)/1947–48.



1.2 Territory claimed for West Bengal by the Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association.

more modest than the Congress Scheme. Unlike the Scheme, the Plan stuck firmly to the rule that the new state should consist only of contiguous territories with Hindu communal majorities. It laid claim only to a tiny handful of carefully chosen tracts in Muslim-majority areas on the basis of 'other factors'.

There were good reasons, Gupta argued, why the Congress should put forward two proposals. By highlighting the shortcomings in the Congress Plan, Gupta insisted he could persuade the Boundary Commission to

accept the Congress Scheme.[36] But the other parties were not convinced by this strategy of smoke and mirrors. They found it too devious and were convinced that it was a recipe for failure. By ten votes to two, the smaller parties used their majority on the committee to put forward as their final memorandum only the larger demands in the Congress Scheme. Faced by this revolt by the small (but numerous) fry, Atul Gupta threatened to resign from the committee.[37]

It was only at this point that the Congress top brass intervened. Dr Prafulla Ghosh urged the Congress president Acharya Kripalani to throw his weight behind Gupta's view,[38] and Delhi persuaded Gupta to withdraw his resignation. But any semblance of unity among the Hindus had been lost. The Central Coordination Committee now fell apart. The Congress decided to go it alone and presented its two alternatives, the Scheme and the Plan, to the commission. As for the Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association, they decided jointly to submit their own, quite different, memorandum to the Bengal Boundary Commission.[39] The unbridgeable differences in the Hindu camp about the shape of the new West Bengal were now out in the open. The Congress had shown that, if push came to shove, it was ready to sacrifice unity on the Coordination Committee in order to achieve its design for West Bengal. As the party which saw itself as the new state's government-in-waiting, the Congress was no longer able to pretend that it had the same perspective and the same agenda as its erstwhile allies. Significantly, the divisions in the committee foreshadowed the splits which were to take place in the Hindu alliance after partition and the creation of West Bengal. One side, the Congress, which pressed for a 'minimalist' state, took office, while the others, who wanted a much bigger Bengal, were relegated to the opposition benches.

The split on the Coordination Committee had another significant aspect. It revealed the particular dilemma the Bengal Congress faced. Demanding as it did a smaller state than its allies of yesteryear, the Congress was hugely vulnerable once it spelt out precisely what new

[36] As Gupta explained to Kripalani, his purpose was 'to show the defects of the plan to strengthen our argument for adopting the Scheme of partition . . . this cannot be done by keeping Plan I up the sleeve and bringing it out only after the attack on the Scheme of partition by the Muslim League and Muslim commissioners': Atul Chandra Gupta to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I, G-33/1947–48.

[37] *Ibid.* [38] Prafulla Ghosh to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I, G-33/1947–48.

[39] *Memorandum for the Bengal Boundary Commission. Submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association*, SPM Papers, 1st Instalment, Printed Matter, Serial No. 8, File No. 17/1947.

borders it wanted.[40] Since it would be the legatee and main beneficiary of the new borders, the Congress was open to the charge of giving away Bengal's birthright and surrendering 'national' territory for its own short-term advantages. In pushing for some districts and not for others, the Congress was striving to create a new state in which it could capture and retain power. But the price for achieving this goal was giving its former allies and about-to-be opposition an armoury of grievances against the Congress for 'betraying' them, its erstwhile constituents in East Bengal and indeed 'Mother India' itself.

The Mahasabha and its allies were quick to recognise this. Once the Hindu alliance had fallen irretrievably apart, they swiftly concluded that they had nothing to lose by making even more outrageous territorial claims for the new state. They decided to play to the gallery of the extreme Hindu right, whose demands were even more fantastic than their own.[41] Since they now had little expectation of having a role in running the new state, they could afford the luxury of the irresponsible and make ever wilder claims. So, despite the fact that they had previously supported the Congress Scheme, they now blithely asserted that 'mere communal strength and territorial contiguity must yield place to other vital considerations', which included 'similarity of manners and customs' and 'cultural and historic associations'.[42] Nadia was thus claimed on the grounds that it was the 'birthplace of Sri Chaitanya', Rajshahi because 'the Varendra Research Society' had pitched its camp on its infidel soil and Barisal because it was a 'stronghold of [Hindu] nationalism'.[43] These claims were bound to fail, but by making them their protagonists could portray themselves as the fearless champions of the Hindu cause who had fought the good fight to the bitter end. If, on the other hand, by some miracle they won for the new state even the smallest piece of territory over and beyond what the Congress had asked for, they could strut as heroes who

[40] In another context, one analyst has noted that 'the blows to national pride and prestige caused by cutting off part of what was regarded as the state's territory' threaten 'the legitimacy of the power elites held culpable for such load-shedding': B. O'Leary, 'The elements of right-sizing and right-peopling the state', in O'Leary, I. S. Lustick and T. Callaghy (eds.), *Right-sizing the state. The politics of moving borders*, Oxford, 2001, p. 57.

[41] The Arya Rashtra Sangha claimed four-fifths of the territory of Bengal for the new state, on the grounds that Hindus were owners of four-fifths of its land; it also demanded that every single town should go to the West because over three-quarters of the urban population of undivided Bengal was Hindu. See Krishna Kumar Chatterjee, *Arya Rashtra Sangha: Warning*, undated, in AICC-I, CL-14(D)/1948.

[42] *Memorandum for the Bengal Boundary Commission. Submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association*, p. 1.

[43] *Ibid.*

had stood firm for the Hindus, in contrast to a weak-kneed and self-serving Congress which demanded too little and did not get enough.

The Mahasabha strategy had another inwardness. With no immediate prospects of gaining office, the Mahasabha was looking for ways to improve its future electoral standing in West Bengal. To carve out a place for itself in the new state's politics, it had to demand, and to be seen to have demanded, that the few safe Mahasabha constituencies which it commanded in undivided Bengal be given to West Bengal. The Mahasabha's main bases had been in the eastern districts, in particular in Barisal and Dacca.[44] In the early 1940s, the Mahasabha had also won some support among the Scheduled Castes through its *shuddhi* (purification) and *sangathan* (consolidation) campaigns.[45] Of the Scheduled Castes, the Namasudras were the most influential, and they also tended to be concentrated in eastern districts, particularly in Jessore and Faridpur. This was why, wholly ignoring the logic of partition, the Mahasabha demanded that these areas, even though they were predominantly Muslim, should be given to West Bengal.[46] Perhaps no Mahasabha leader actually belived that any of these demands would succeed, but they calculated that the mere fact of having made them would win them favour among Hindu refugees from eastern Bengal, who had already begun to leave their homes and trickle into Calcutta. With their eye upon refugees as a source of future political support in what was potentially a core constituency, the Mahasabha justified its far-fetched territorial claims with the argument that 'the new State of West Bengal should be in a position to provide for

[44] Writing in August 1945, Ashutosh Lahiry, the secretary of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, claimed that it had 1,400 branches all over Bengal: Ashutosh Lahiry to Rai Bahadur Surendra Nath Gupta Bhaya, 14 August 1945, SPM Papers, II–IV Instalment, File No. 90/1944–45. His claim cannot be substantiated, but the party's papers indicate that the most dynamic Mahasabha branch was in Barisal, that those in Narayanganj, Dacca, Sirajganj, Noakhali, Brahmanbaria, Pabna and Chandpur were also quite active, but that they did not have much of a presence elsewhere.

[45] The Mahasabha made a sustained effort to win over the Scheduled Castes by holding ceremonies of 'purification', in which members of the lowest castes and tribal groups were encouraged to renounce their 'impure' ways and re-enter the Hindu fold. This campaign is described in J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 195–203.

[46] The Mahasabha Memorandum insisted that: 'all the Scheduled Caste members from West Bengal had voted for the partition of Bengal and had joined the Hindu campaign for a separate homeland. It is the universal desire of all sections of Scheduled Castes to remain as citizens of the Indian Union. The recognised leaders of the Scheduled Castes have in unequivocal terms demanded their inclusion in the West Bengal Province and declared their unwillingness to join the Pakistan State. For this reason we demand the inclusion of the Sub-Division of Gopalganj which is predominantly a Scheduled Caste area as well as the adjoining territory in the districts of Faridpur and Bakarganj': *Memorandum for the Bengal Boundary Commission. Submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association*, p. 4.

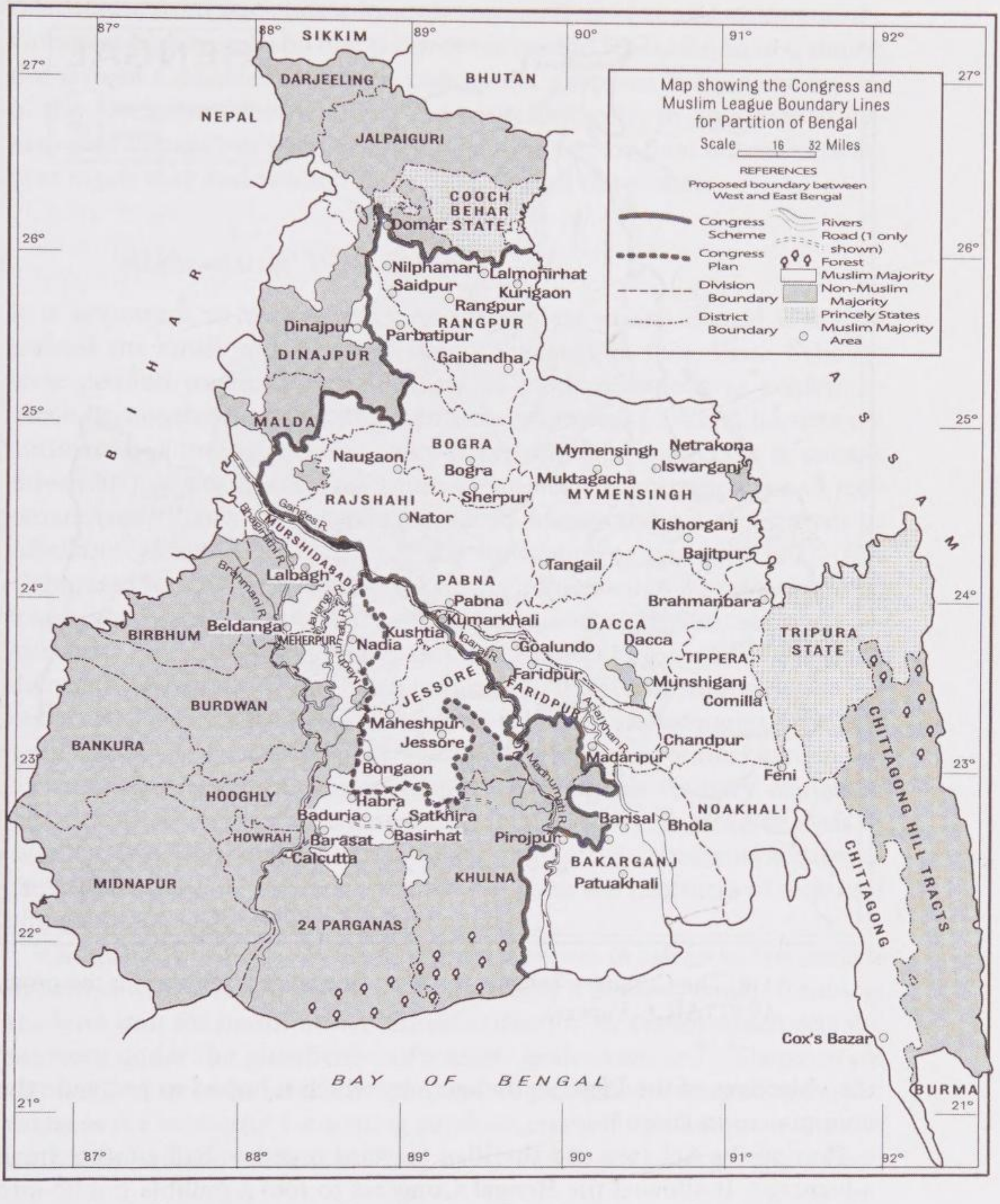
the inclusion and accommodation of immigrants from Pakistan'.[47] No Mahasabha representative on the committee could have been under any illusion that the Boundary Commission would be swayed by this flurry of demands, but they all could see the propaganda value of the party portraying itself as the unbending champion of Hindu refugees, which had spoken up for a greater West Bengal.

The dons of the Bengal Congress, however, could not afford such quixotic gestures. At long last, power was within their grasp inside a province they could call their own. As the government-in-waiting, they had compelling reasons to leave out areas that might challenge their authority and undermine their still-uncertain control. If West Bengal contained large Muslim-dominated tracts, this would dangerously dilute the Hindu majority and weaken their hold over the new state. For the Congress in Bengal, a compact and defensible state with a clear-cut Hindu majority was a more attractive option than making bids to include Muslim territories over which they had long ago lost all semblance of control. These were the hard facts of Bengal's political arithmetic. But prudence dictated that they could not openly be stated, given the frenzied jingoism among Hindus in western Bengal and the growing despair of millions of Hindus in the east.

So it can be seen why Atul Gupta's strategy of putting forward side by side two sets of quite different proposals made good political sense. It was a subtle piece of casuistry designed to blind the Hindu public from seeing clearly what borders the Bengal Congress really wanted. The Scheme was meant to create the misleading impression that the Congress was asking for more territory than it actually was. In fact, from the start Congress wanted its more modest Plan to succeed. This was the reason why Atul Gupta resigned from the Coordination Committee when his colleagues refused to give it their backing. As Dr Prafulla Ghosh explained to Acharya Kripalani when Gupta had put in his papers, 'it would be wrong not to put [the Plan] [forward]. In my humble opinion the Scheme of partition can never be accepted. So Plan No. 1 should be submitted as a proposal. [The] unreasonableness of the Scheme of partition will be apparent and if we do not put this Plan before the judges we shall lose our case.'[48] This makes it abundantly clear that at no stage did the Bengal Congress leadership expect its larger demands to succeed. It was the Scheme which was intended to be a stalking horse (see map 1.3), and not the Plan, as Gupta

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 2. Indeed, even after the Radcliffe Award was announced, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee continued to insist in Parliament that more east Pakistani areas be seized to house the refugees in West Bengal, and the issue remained one of the focal points of Mahasabha campaigns at least until the first general elections in 1952.

[48] Prafulla Ghosh to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I, G-33/1947–48.



1.3 Territory claimed for West Bengal by the Congress Scheme and Plan.

had told his Hindu allies. Putting the Scheme forward was a tactic devised to improve the chances of getting through their more modest and carefully contrived Plan. The Scheme served as a counterpoint to show the Boundary Commission just how sober, moderate and reasonable were

1.4 The Congress Scheme for West Bengal as publicised in the press, 1947 (AICC Papers).

the objectives of the Plan, a stratagem by which it hoped to persuade the commission to adopt it.

Putting the Scheme and the Plan forward together had another huge advantage. It allowed the Bengal Congress to fool a gullible public into thinking that it had pressed for the larger Bengal which the Scheme envisaged, but had been frustrated by the Boundary Commission. It was no accident that Congress gave the Scheme extravagant publicity in the Hindu press (see map 1.4). Everyone, including the viceroy and the Congress high command, was acutely aware of how dangerous an issue the new borders were bound to be and of how important it was to distance

themselves from Radcliffe's Line. Just as in Delhi Mountbatten and the Congress high command had taken cover behind Radcliffe, so in Calcutta the Bengal Congress sought to conceal its purposes behind the screen of the Congress Scheme. They did so deliberately, in an effort to disassociate themselves from any responsibility for the final outcome, however much they had worked for it from behind the scenes.

'Right-sizing' West Bengal

It is important to understand *why* the leaders of the Bengal Congress wanted the small and compact state delineated in their Plan. Scholars have pointed to the drive of leaders of modern nations to achieve as much homogeneity as possible within their borders.[49] When borders are redrawn and pulled inwards, they have argued, contraction is usually driven by the aim of creating a 'more nationally homogeneous and legitimate rump-state' by 'shedding the load of governing a recalcitrant or rebellious people', or 'hiving off the unwanted or undesirable'.[50] The Congress Plan for West Bengal was clearly influenced by such imperatives: it sought to create a new state with an unequivocal Hindu majority, *containing as few Muslims as possible*. But much stood in the way of achieving this goal. In the first place, large numbers of Muslims, sometimes actual majorities, lived in tracts which Congress saw had to be acquired if the new state was to survive and prosper. Secondly, while most of the heartland of the new state had clear Hindu majorities, even this territory contained significant numbers of Muslims, albeit in a minority. A close analysis of the Congress Plan shows the extreme care with which its authors addressed these difficulties, all the more remarkable given the pressures of time and circumstance under which they had to work.

The guiding principle of the Congress Plan was to ask for as few parcels of land in which Muslims were in a majority as it possibly could. It took as the base unit for partition the 'criminal district' or *thana*, which was the territory under the jurisdiction of a single police station.[51] Thanas were the smallest units for which the census had published data, and using the thana as the basic unit for settling partition enabled the Congress to stake its territorial claims with a precision which would not otherwise have been

[49] Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from violence. Conflict and the refugee crisis in the developing world*, New York and Oxford, 1992.

[50] O'Leary, 'Right-sizing and right-peopling', pp. 56–7.

[51] *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Boundary Commission*, p. 27. In contrast, the Muslim League demanded that the larger administrative units called 'sub-divisions' should be the unit in determining the partition. See J. Chatterji, 'Fashioning a frontier'.

possible.[52] On this basis, the Congress asked for just one Muslim-majority 'police station' in Rangpur and Rajshahi and only four in Malda. It also asked for parts of Nadia adding up to 1,904 square miles. The largest claim it staked to 'Muslim' territory was its bid for the whole of Murshidabad, which had a Muslim majority of 56 per cent. Taken together, these parcels of territory comprised about 4,500 square miles, or just over a tenth of the area of the new state of West Bengal which the Plan had in mind (see map 1.4). That new state would have a population in which Hindus formed a majority of over 70 per cent. In nine-tenths of it, Hindus would have a majority, however minimal.

Significantly, in at least three-quarters of the territory claimed by the Plan, Hindus were in a majority of over 55 per cent. The planners clearly believed that this demographic margin was sufficient to ensure a robust Hindu dominance over West Bengal. Why they should have plumped for 55 per cent as the magic number is unclear, but perhaps the experience of local self-government since the 1920s was the key factor in persuading the party bosses that they needed a 5 per cent margin in order to get and keep control of government. The Government of India Act of 1920 had set up union and local boards to run the localities, and their members were chosen by joint electorates. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the number of Muslims elected to these bodies had risen steadily. Long before the introduction of full adult franchise, Muslims had shown that their numbers enabled them to capture power in union and district boards, even in places where they had only a slender majority in the population as a whole. But in localities where numbers of Muslims fell even slightly short of a bare majority, the union and local boards had remained firmly under Hindu control.[53] After independence, everyone expected that West Bengal would have joint electorates and that every adult would have the vote. Political Bengal's experience of local self-government was the only guide from its past about how the numbers of Hindus and Muslims might affect the future balance of political power in the new state. Experience in the decades before the Second World War pointed to

[52] It is not an accident that a central plank of the case the Congress presented before the Boundary Commission was that the thana (and not the district or sub-division, as the Muslim League claimed) was the most appropriate 'unit of partition': *ibid.*

[53] For example, Muslims had again and again won half or more of the seats on the local boards in Malda and Murshidabad where they were only 51.51 per cent and 53.56 per cent respectively of the total population. In contrast, in Khulna, where Muslims were 49 per cent of the population, they never succeeded in capturing more than 39 per cent of the seats on union boards between 1920 and 1935. See J. A. Gallagher, 'Congress in decline. Bengal, 1930–1939', *Modern Asian Studies*, 7, 3 (1973), pp. 601–7, and Appendix G of the *Resolutions reviewing the reports on the working of district, local and union boards in Bengal 1920–1921 to 1934–1935*, Calcutta, 1922–37.

the conclusion that having an outright Hindu majority in as many constituencies as possible was the key to the political kingdom.[54] Since no one as yet knew how the boundaries of constituencies would be drawn, or what their size would be, it was vital to secure Hindu majorities in as many as possible of the smallest units making up the new state. This was the best way, Congress calculated, to guarantee Hindu control of West Bengal in a democratic and independent India.

For the same reasons, the authors of the Plan avoided asking for any part of Muslim-majority Bengal – however valuable its resources or whatever compelling other 'special factors' there might have been – where the Hindu population fell below a carefully calculated minimum level of 43 per cent and to which, on grounds of contiguity, Pakistan had a right. With reluctance, they had to make rare exceptions to this general rule and accept that West Bengal would need title to a few 'islands' of territory in which Muslims were an inconvenient majority. But these Muslim 'pockets' were, in the main, situated along Bengal's western border with the province of Bihar, also a part of the Indian union, with the comforting consequence that these islets of Muslims would be surrounded by a sea of Hindus. There were nine such tracts, covering in all an area of about 3,000 square miles. Jointly and severally, each of them was scrutinised with great care by the committee before being included in the Plan, as Chatterjee's important little work, *The partition of Bengal. A geographical study with maps and diagrams*, published in Calcutta in 1947, amply proves. In summary, the committee concluded that the new state could not in every single instance avoid laying claim to a few Muslim tracts, but it did so in not one more case than was judged to be absolutely necessary.[55] In today's inelegant jargon of 'majoritarian comfort levels', the architects of the Plan worked out, in a remarkably calibrated manner, just how many Muslim 'undesirables' they were prepared to tolerate inside their Hindu sanctuary.

One extremely significant point emerges from a study of the Plan. All this careful plotting rested on the assumption, soon to be proved to be

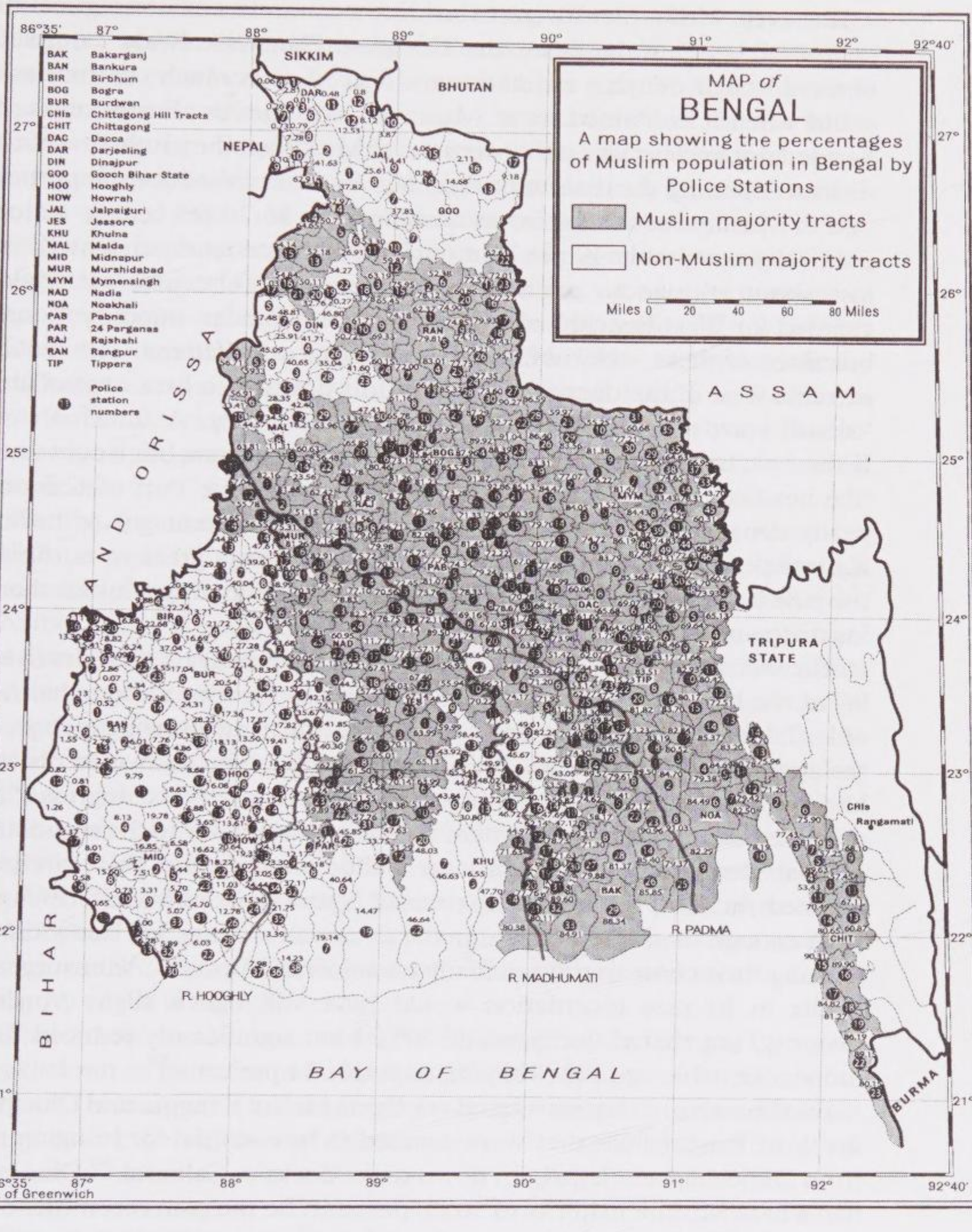
[54] Another factor which may have influenced these sometimes parochial strategists was Rajagopalachari's 1944 'formula' for partition, in which this Congress statesman from the south had famously and controversially proposed 55 per cent as an 'absolute majority' to determine whether a district should stay in India or go to Pakistan. That the Congress members of the Coordination Committee knew all about the formula is evident from a booklet written by one of its 'expert' members, the geographer Chatterjee (see n. 83). See S. P. Chatterjee, *The partition of Bengal. A geographical study with maps and diagrams*, Calcutta, 1947, pp. 9–11. By an interesting coincidence, Rajagopalachari became the first governor of West Bengal, and was well regarded by the ministry during his stay at Belvedere.

[55] *Ibid.*, pp. 21–2.

false, that partition would not entail major movements of population. The authors of the Plan evidently assumed that the balance between Hindus and Muslims in West Bengal as a whole, and also in each individual local arena, would remain as it was, forever preserved in aspic, and not be changed significantly by partition. Not a single Hindu politician entered into his calculations the impact of a large exodus of Muslims from West Bengal to Pakistan or a large influx of Hindus from the east and how this would upset their tidy sums. Indeed, such a calculus might have encouraged the authors of the Plan to be less conservative in their claims and to risk bidding for more key Muslim-majority territories, since Muslim numbers were soon to be diluted by their large-scale emigration to the east and the countervailing flood westwards of many Hindus from the east.

Instead, the Plan stuck strictly and painstakingly to the 55 per cent rule. As map 1.5 – the hand-drawn and annotated map submitted by the Bengal leaders to the Congress high command – shows, the calculations were made on ordnance maps on a thana-by-thana basis.[56] In the few instances where the Congress Plan bent the rule to try and usurp tracts where Muslims were in a majority, there were always imperative reasons for doing so. For example, the Muslim-majority thanas claimed by the Congress in Malda and Nadia were all key points in the complex Ganges–Bhagirathi river systems, which gave control over the management of the rivers which were essential for the trade, agriculture and drainage of the central and southern regions of West Bengal. The Hooghly river, by now in full-blown decay, had somehow to be nursed back to a semblance of good health if Calcutta was to have a future as an entrepot. This depended critically on ensuring that the Hooghly was regularly flushed by fresh waters from the Ganges, Bhagirathi and Nadia rivers. As the Congress Plan explained, 'this territory . . . has been included in West Bengal for the most compelling factor of essential necessity for requirements and preservation of the Port of Calcutta. The life of the Province of West Bengal is mostly dependent on Calcutta, and with the partition it will become wholly so dependent.'[57] The Ganges entered Bengal along the northern frontier between Murshidabad and Malda, and this was why the new province of West Bengal, as mapped out in the Congress Plan, had to have Murshidabad and parts of Malda, despite the awkward fact that they were inhabited by Muslim majorities.

[56] This map was found in the Rajendra Prasad Papers, File 1-B/47.
[57] *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Boundary Commission*, p. 7.



1.5 Copy of a hand-drawn map showing Muslim population per police station in Bengal, 1947, found in the Rajendra Prasad Papers.

But even where there were overriding economic and strategic arguments for bending the rules, the Congress Plan was always careful to observe its self-denying ordinance and leave out as much territory as it could when it contained more Muslims than Hindus. For example, it decided not to claim five police stations of Malda 'on the south-east of the district adjoining the district of Rajshahi' in order to reduce the proportion of Muslims in the district as a whole from 56.79 per cent to a more politically acceptable 49 per cent, which past experience suggested was just about enough to maintain Hindu control. The parts of Malda claimed for West Bengal had within them four Muslim-majority thanas, but three of these – Harishchandrapur, Ratua and Kharba – lay in 'the extreme west of the district' and were thus deemed to be a controllable 'island' surrounded on all sides by Hindu territory. A fourth thana, Kaliachak, lay in the east and was contiguous to Pakistan, but it contained 'the headwaters of the river Bhagirathi, on which the Port of Calcutta partly depends'. In this instance, the economic advantages of having Kaliachak in West Bengal were deemed sufficiently great to outweigh the political arguments against including a predominantly Muslim thana inside the new state.[58]

The architects of the Plan included Nadia for similar reasons. Its rivers lay at the heart of the eponymous river system on which depended not only Calcutta's future prosperity, but also the future well-being of most of the agriculture in the central West Bengal region. The undivided district had a substantial Muslim majority of 61.26 per cent. The Congress Plan proposed to let Pakistan have all of the district which lay to the east of the Mathabhanga river, except for six police stations. By this carefully planned excision, the remaining parts of Nadia claimed for West Bengal were enough to give the new state the river waters it needed but without diluting their control with too many unwelcome Muslims. After surgery, Nadia in its new incarnation would have still had a slight Muslim majority, but that majority would have been significantly reduced to a more acceptable and politically manageable 54 per cent.[59]

Further north, Congress wanted one thana each of Rangpur and Dinajpur for West Bengal since they were deemed to be essential for bringing tea from Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri down to the docks in Calcutta.[60] Dinajpur had a bare Muslim majority of 50.20 per cent. So the plan recommended that Pakistan should be given eight of its eastern police stations which

[58] *Ibid.* [59] 'Detailed tables relating to the Plan', *ibid.*, p. 16.

[60] Bhurangamari thana in Rangpur was included in West Bengal in the Congress Plan because 'the only Railway line connecting the Indian Union with Assam runs through this Police Station': 'Note on special points of the Plan', *ibid.*, p. 7.

had Muslim majorities, thereby reducing the Muslims in western Dinajpur, which was the part the Congress wanted for West Bengal, to what was seen to be a 'safe' minority of 44 per cent. It is true that one thana in western Dinajpur which was claimed for West Bengal had a Muslim majority. But that thana contained the district headquarters of Dinajpur town, and here 'the Muslims outnumber[ed] the non-Muslims by less than 1,500 in a total population of over 1 lac [*lakh*]'.[61] The implication is clear: having 1,500 more Muslims in a town of 100,000 was not a sufficient reason to give up a key town, yet another example of the calculations – precise, meticulous, clear and reasoned – which lay behind the detail in the Congress Plan. The Plan was systematically designed to create a new state with clear overall Hindu majorities in most constituencies, laying claims, carefully crafted and always moderate, only to those tracts which were judged to have absolutely essential resources.

Khulna, by contrast, was deemed to have no particular resources which, at a pinch, West Bengal could not do without. So the planners concluded that there was no reason to demand special treatment for Khulna. What Khulna did have was a Hindu majority (but only by a bare margin of just over 50 per cent); it was also a large district with fertile soil which produced more rice than it consumed, but it had not much else going for it. Moreover, Khulna contained worryingly large Muslim 'pockets'.[62] In consequence, the Congress was not committed to keeping Khulna; indeed, if push came to shove, the Congress was ready to trade Khulna for Murshidabad.[63] Yet if Khulna went to Pakistan, Hindu-majority areas in Faridpur and Bakarganj which could have been claimed for West Bengal on the ground of contiguity to Khulna would also end up in Pakistan. This, however, was a price the Bengal Congress was ready to pay in order to keep Murshidabad in West Bengal and to ensure the integrity of the Ganges river system.

The conclusion is clear: in 1947 the leaders of the Bengal Congress decided not to press for more land for West Bengal than they felt able to control, the only exceptions being a few vitally important tracts regarded as crucial for the well-being of the new state. The making of the Congress

61 'Note on special points of the Plan', *ibid.*, p. 7.

62 These were the thanas of Kaliganj, Fultala and Mollahat: 'Note on special points of the Plan', *ibid.*, p. 9. Together, they covered almost 300 square miles: S. P. Chatterjee, *The partition of Bengal*, p. 21.

63 Murshidabad had a Muslim majority of 56.55 per cent. Writing to Kripalani, Gupta insisted that this district had to be claimed for West Bengal 'in any event': Atul Chandra Gupta to J. B. Kripalani, 12 July 1947, AICC-I, G-33/1947–48. See also Ramagopal Banerjee to J. B. Kripalani, 10 September 1947, *ibid.*

Plan was an exercise in self-denial; and its authors, with more reason than Robert Clive, might well have stood astounded by their own moderation.

The minimalists' demand

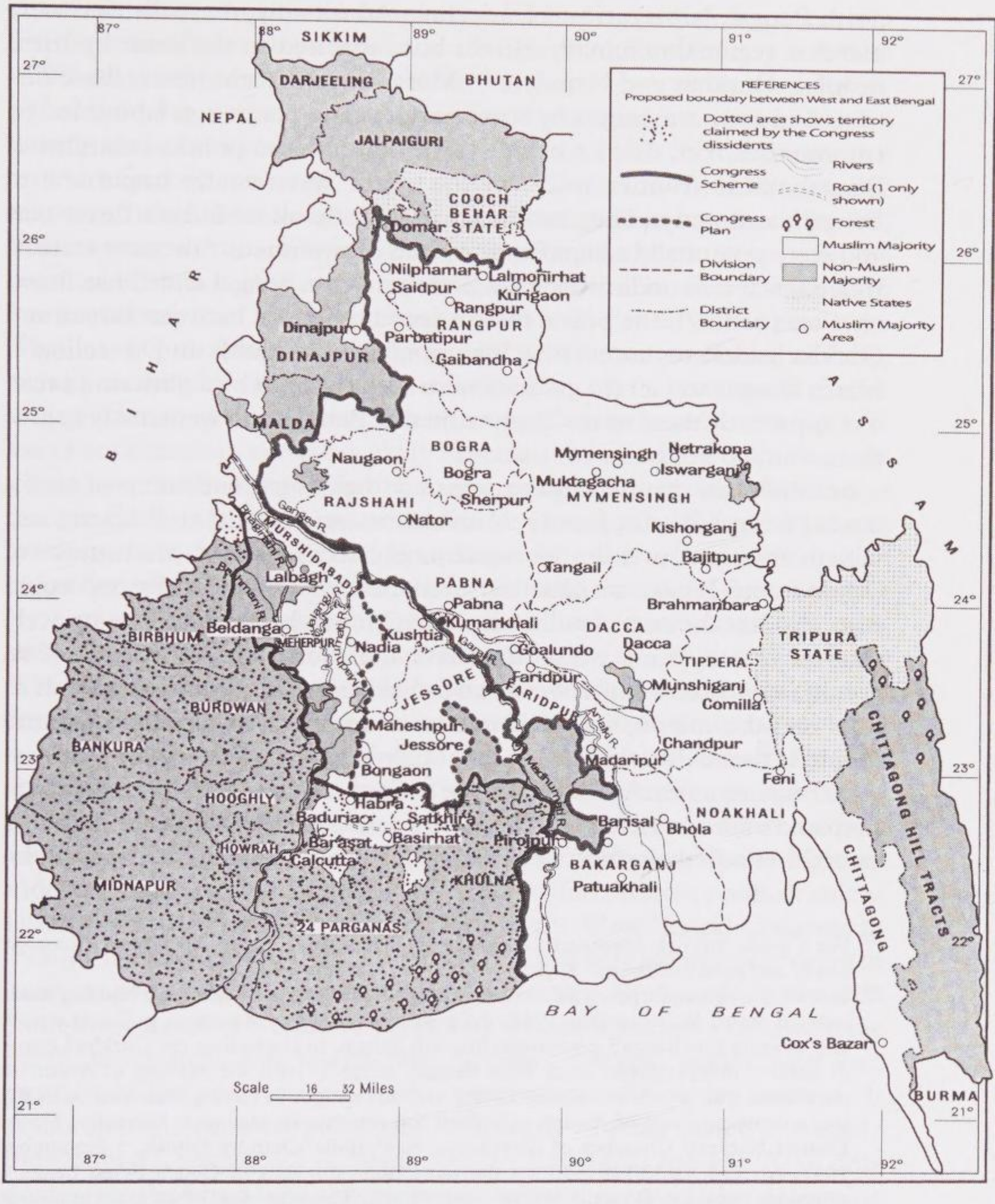
This careful and modest Plan for West Bengal went too far, however, for the extremists of the 'minimalist' camp. Influential voices within the Congress were raised against bidding even for these few carefully chosen Muslim-majority thanas. In December 1946, a Congress-sponsored body called the West Bengal Provincial Committee had been set up in Calcutta to muster support for partition. In May 1947, this committee put out a pamphlet entitled *The origin and progress of the partition movement in Bengal.*[64] According to its authors, in January 1947 the Congress Provincial Committee had split over the boundaries proposed for West Bengal. After the split, breakaway dissidents in the committee formed the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti (National Bengal Unity Committee, known as the Samiti), with Jadabendranath Panja of the Burdwan District Congress Committee as president and Atulya Ghosh (secretary of the Hooghly Congress) as secretary. This organisation lobbied to give away to Pakistan not only the Muslim-majority districts of Nadia, Jessore and Murshidabad (and hence on the grounds of contiguity Malda and Dinajpur as well) but also the *Hindu-majority* districts of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling in North Bengal (see map 1.6).[65]

This points to the existence of a powerful dissident caucus inside the Congress which wanted an even smaller and more compact state than the Congress Plan envisaged. That lean state, trimmed to the bone, would have included only the Hindu-majority districts of south-west and central Bengal. Remarkably, some of those associated with this proposal would go on to back irredentist claims for a 'greater' West Bengal in the 1950s.[66] But in 1947, in striking contrast to the wild claims of the Mahasabha and other parties, they insisted that less was best. Their extraordinary

[64] Hemanta Kumar Sarkar was its general secretary and Upendranath Banerjee its president. See *The origin and progress of the partition movement in Bengal*, West Bengal Provisional Committee, Calcutta, 1 May 1947, AICC-I, CL-14(D)/1946.

[65] It also opposed the demands to include Bengali-speaking areas of Bihar in the new West Bengal state: *ibid.* See 'Memorandum on the creation of a new province in Bengal', by Radhanath Das, Abdus Sattar, Jadabendranath Panja, Kanailal Das and Phakir Chandra Roy, AICC-I, CL-14(D)/1946.

[66] Indeed, one of the authors of the plan, Atulya Ghosh, would later head the campaign to claim parts of Bihar for West Bengal. The role of the West Bengal Congress in the movement for a greater Bengal is discussed in Marcus Franda, *West Bengal and the federalizing process in India*, Princeton, 1968.



1.6 Territory claimed for West Bengal by the Congress dissidents.

proposals thus need to be considered, to see which areas they proposed to include, which they were ready to jettison, and the reasons why.

Two aspects of the dissidents' proposal deserve particular mention. First, it would have surrendered to Pakistan the tea-growing districts of

north Bengal, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. Admittedly, these districts were marcher regions, nominally Hindu but inhabited in the main by tribal peoples, Gurkhas and Nepalese.[67] Moreover, in recent times, these districts had seen campaigns by sharecroppers and plantation labour led by communists. Yet, despite being on the cultural and political margins of Bengal, these frontier tracts in the north were vitally important to Bengal's economy. They produced practically all of India's finest teas and were potentially a significant source of revenue for the new state.[68] Indeed, when boundary disputes between West Bengal and Bihar flared up after partition, the police told of secret meetings between Bihari and Gurkha leaders to discuss how Bihar might get its hands on Darjeeling.[69] North Bengal and its tea gardens were seen by all to be a glittering prize. Yet apparently there were Congressmen in Bengal who were ready to give them away to Pakistan.

Secondly, the dissidents were prepared to give up four districts of north-central Bengal (Nadia, Jessore, Murshidabad and Malda) to Pakistan, and with them control over the river systems which others saw as vital arteries of the new state. If Pakistan had been given these districts, West Bengal would have also lost the crucial railheads at Rangpur and Dinajpur. The princely state of Cooch Behar would also have been lost, on the grounds of its contiguity to places which would go to Pakistan. Taking their proposals as a whole, the minimalist dissidents were ready to write off four entire districts,[70] and large parts of five others,[71] territories totalling almost 7,000 square miles. Moreover, three of the four districts which they were prepared blithely to jettison – Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar – had outright Hindu majorities. In exchange for this largesse to Pakistan, all the

[67] For a guide through Jalpaiguri's ethnographic maze, see Ranajit Das Gupta, *Economy, society and politics in Bengal. Jalpaiguri 1869–1947*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 5–26.

[68] Indeed, the economic potential of these two districts was so great that neighbouring states coveted them. In September 1947, there were reports that Assamese politicians were encouraging anti-Bengali movements in north Bengal. In Darjeeling, the Gurkha League demanded independence from West Bengal, allegedly with the backing of Assamese politicians and British tea planters (who saw advantages in having their estates in the less volatile province of Assam, safe from the communist menace): Secretary, Dacca District National Chamber of Commerce, to Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, 5 September 1947, AICC-I, G-30/1947–48. At the same time, the Raja of Cooch Behar began a campaign against Bengali *bhatias* (outsiders), insisting that the autochthonous Rajbangshi tribal people of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar had more in common with their neighbours in Assam than with the babus of Bengal. If Cooch Behar was not to be allowed to exist as a separate state, its Raja wanted to be part of Assam rather than West Bengal.

[69] Superintendent of Police (Intelligence Branch), Darjeeling, to Special Superintendent of Police (Intelligence Branch), West Bengal, 15 July 1953, GB IB File No. 1034/48.

[70] Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Murshidabad.

[71] Dinajpur, Malda, Rangpur, Nadia and Jessore.

dissidents wanted was Khulna and a few Hindu-majority police stations in Fardipur and Bakarganj which were contiguous to Khulna.

What lay behind the Samiti's thinking remains a matter for speculation. One might have expected Congressmen from Khulna to have played a part in this curious set of territorial priorities, since for them no price would have been too high to pay to keep Khulna in West Bengal. But since neither of the two top office-holders of the Samiti was from Khulna, and members from Khulna were not particularly prominent in the Samiti,[72] this is surely not the only explanation. The Samiti may have been worried that including the north-central zones, with their large Muslim populations and a dangerous level of communist activity, would undermine the political cohesiveness of the new state under Congress management. But while this was likely to have been an important consideration, the most likely explanation is that the Samiti's campaign was the first shot fired in a new struggle for mastery within the Bengal Congress. After August 1947, the Congress in West Bengal was torn apart for four long years by a bitter fight for control of the party organisation. In this fratricidal strife, the battle lines were drawn largely by region. The inwardness of this contest will be discussed in later chapters, but it is significant that Congressmen from the heartland of West Bengal (chiefly Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnapore) in time came to form the alliance which won control of the party. It also was not a coincidence that Atulya Ghosh of Hooghly and Jadabendranath Panja of Burdwan were key players in that faction.[73] That these two men were both involved in the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti suggests that a new factional alliance within the Congress had begun to crystallise well before independence. Atulya Ghosh, whose talents for ruthless political calculation were to win him the secretaryship of the West Bengal Congress in 1950, could already see that, if the new state was able somehow or other to be restricted to the Burdwan and the Presidency division, Congressmen from these districts would be eminently well positioned to take over the party. In its turn, this would put his own emerging faction into pole position in the race to capture the government after independence. It seems that the canniest politicians in Bengal, whether inside or outside the Congress, were quick to realise that the Radcliffe Line would not only demarcate the boundaries between two nations; it would also determine the future contours of influence and control inside the successor state.

[72] None of the signatories of the Samiti's memorandum was a member of the Khulna District Congress.

[73] On this arm-wrestling within the West Bengal Congress, see Prasanta Sen Gupta, *The Congress party in West Bengal. A study of factionalism 1947–1986*, Calcutta, 1986.

The different plans: contrasts and common ground

The dissident Congress plan of the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti came to nought and was quietly buried along with other stillborn plans for the future borders of West Bengal. But a post-mortem of these rival schemes reveals much of interest.

One striking conclusion is that there was an inverse relationship between the size of the territory which parties or factions claimed for the new state and their prospects, realistically speaking, of having a say in running it. Fringe organisations, which were not even given a voice on the Central Coordination Committee, made the largest claims. The Arya Rashtra Sangha and its tiny clutch of diehards, for instance, demanded four-fifths of united Bengal for West Bengal. Only slightly more restrained, but still outrageously optimistic, claims were made by the Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association, both parties on the margins of Bengal's politics. Their schemes would have put almost three-fifths of undivided Bengal, or 41,000 square miles in all, inside the new state.[74] The 'official' Congress leader Prafulla Ghosh, whose command over his party was by no means secure, backed the Congress Plan, which asked for roughly half of united Bengal, or about 37,000 square miles.[75] But from this figure we must subtract the 5,000 or so square miles of Khulna (and by extension, Faridpur and Bakarganj) that the 'official' Congress claimed, but was, as the evidence has powerfully suggested, willing to relinquish. This brought the size of the West Bengal for which the 'official' Congress was actually ready to settle down to about 33,000 square miles. Significantly, the alliance which would before long capture both the Congress and the government of West Bengal made the smallest claim of all, asking for only about 23,500 square miles or just three-tenths of the territory of undivided Bengal (see table 1.1).

This inverse relationship between the size of its claim and the political prospects of the party making the claim is less remarkable than it might appear to be at first sight. It underlines that India's politicians, although soon to be legatees of the Raj, were deeply insecure about their prospects of hanging on to their inheritance. As all previous rulers of India had learnt to their cost, large dominions and restive populations were difficult to manage. In the summer of 1947, with the fragile crust of order in India visibly breaking up all around them, the leaders of the Bengal Congress

[74] *Memorandum for the Bengal Boundary Commission. Submitted by the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha and the New Bengal Association*, Appendix, p. 8.
[75] *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission*, Appendix C/1, p. 17.

Table 1.1. *Territory claimed for West Bengal, by party or political organisation, 1947*

Party or organisation	Territory claimed for West Bengal as a percentage of united Bengal	Territory claimed for West Bengal in square miles
Arya Rashtra Sangha	80	61,953
Hindu Mahasabha/New Bengal Association	54	41,409
Congress Scheme	52	40,137
Congress Plan	48	36,849
Congress Plan less Khulna etc.	42	32,709
Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti	31	23,574

Source: The Congress and Hindu Mahasabha claims in this table have been taken from the memoranda on the partition of Bengal presented by the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha respectively to the Bengal Boundary Commission. The figures for the Arya Rashtra Sangha and the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti have been calculated, by the author, from the territories named in their claims.

saw little sense in having a new state of their own if they were unable to keep control over it. So the essence of their political strategy was to get a state in which they could not only win but also hold on to power. If this meant jettisoning large parts of undivided Bengal and giving up valuable resources, that was a price they were ready to pay.[76]

When the different plans and schemes for the partition of Bengal are compared, a second arresting feature emerges. Superficially, all the plans seem to be ranged along an extremely broad spectrum but, in fact, they had more in common than meets the eye. Every plan for West Bengal asserted that the new state had to contain certain territories of about 23,500 square miles. Every party, faction and fringe group wanted Calcutta for West Bengal and agreed that the city had to be its heart and centre. They all agreed that West Bengal had to have the whole of the Burdwan division as

[76] Significantly, when faced with a similar dilemma in 1920, the Ulster Unionists also reduced their claim to territory. In asking for six counties rather than nine, they broke their sacred 'Covenant', abandoning the Protestants of Donegal, Cavan and Moneghan to 'Papist' rule, despite Westminster's willingness to let them keep all nine. In the case of India, as indicated, the all-India Congress leaders plumped for partition and were ready to excise the Muslim-majority districts of British India to achieve a strong unitary centre after independence. The choices of the Ulstermen in 1920, like those of the Congress high command and of Bengal's Hindu leaders in 1947, suggest that leaders poised to take office see merit in having compact states capable, according to their lights, of being controlled. See J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912–1985. Politics and society*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 44.

well as the 24 Parganas and Khulna in the Presidency division. Tacitly, of course, the Congress Plan included the caveat that Khulna might have to be traded for Murshidabad. This reduced the lowest common territorial denominator in all the plans to only about 18,000 square miles of south-central Bengal (see map 1.7). Significantly, this common ground and the geographical base of the movement that demanded the partition of Bengal were substantially one and the same (see map 1.8).[77]

In its turn, this powerfully suggests that these areas, with the exception of Birbhum,[78] formed the political 'core' of the new state.[79] Those parts of Bengal over and beyond this which were demanded and at the end of the day were won – that is western Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling – were not part of the core but were on the 'periphery' of the new state, important perhaps for economic or other reasons but not essential to its structures of power.[80] This would indicate that, in due course, a quasi-colonial or unequal relationship could be expected to develop between the core territory of south-central West Bengal and its periphery in the north. The extent to which the balance of political and economic power in West Bengal in fact came to be tilted in this way in favour of its 'core' territories will be explored in later chapters. But here it should be noted that every plan for the new state's borders tacitly agreed about what the state's core territory had to be: a reminder that in some matters at least, the bhadralok saw eye to eye, however bitter their internecine struggles on other fronts.

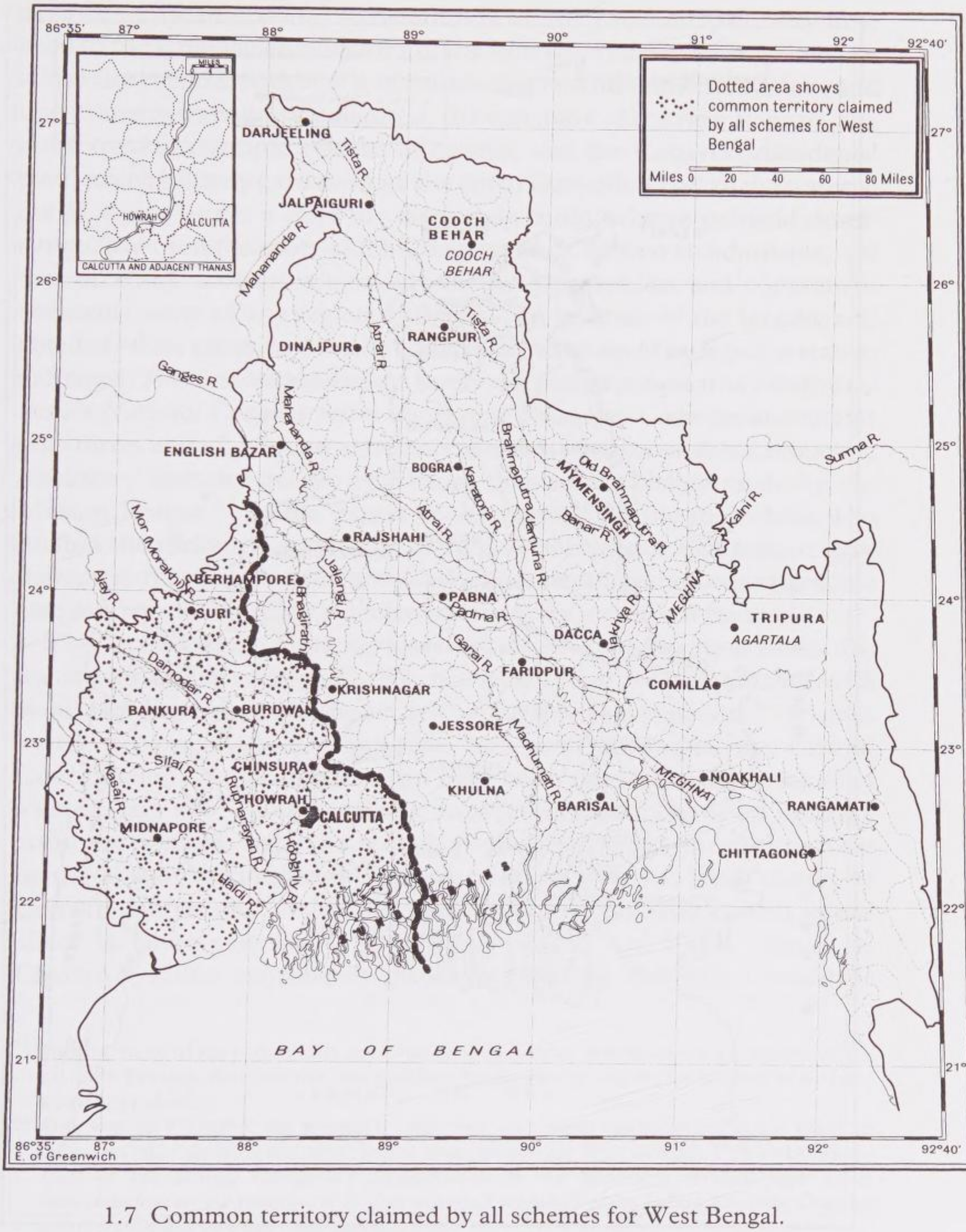
A third significant point emerges from a comparison of the different plans. Each and every one was pre-eminently the product of political calculations. Each proposal was intended to benefit a different group among the Hindu elites in their struggles for power. None of the plans was concerned to anything like the same extent with the resources or

[77] The campaign for Bengal's partition was driven by men from Hooghly, Howrah, Calcutta, the 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Bankura and Midnapore.

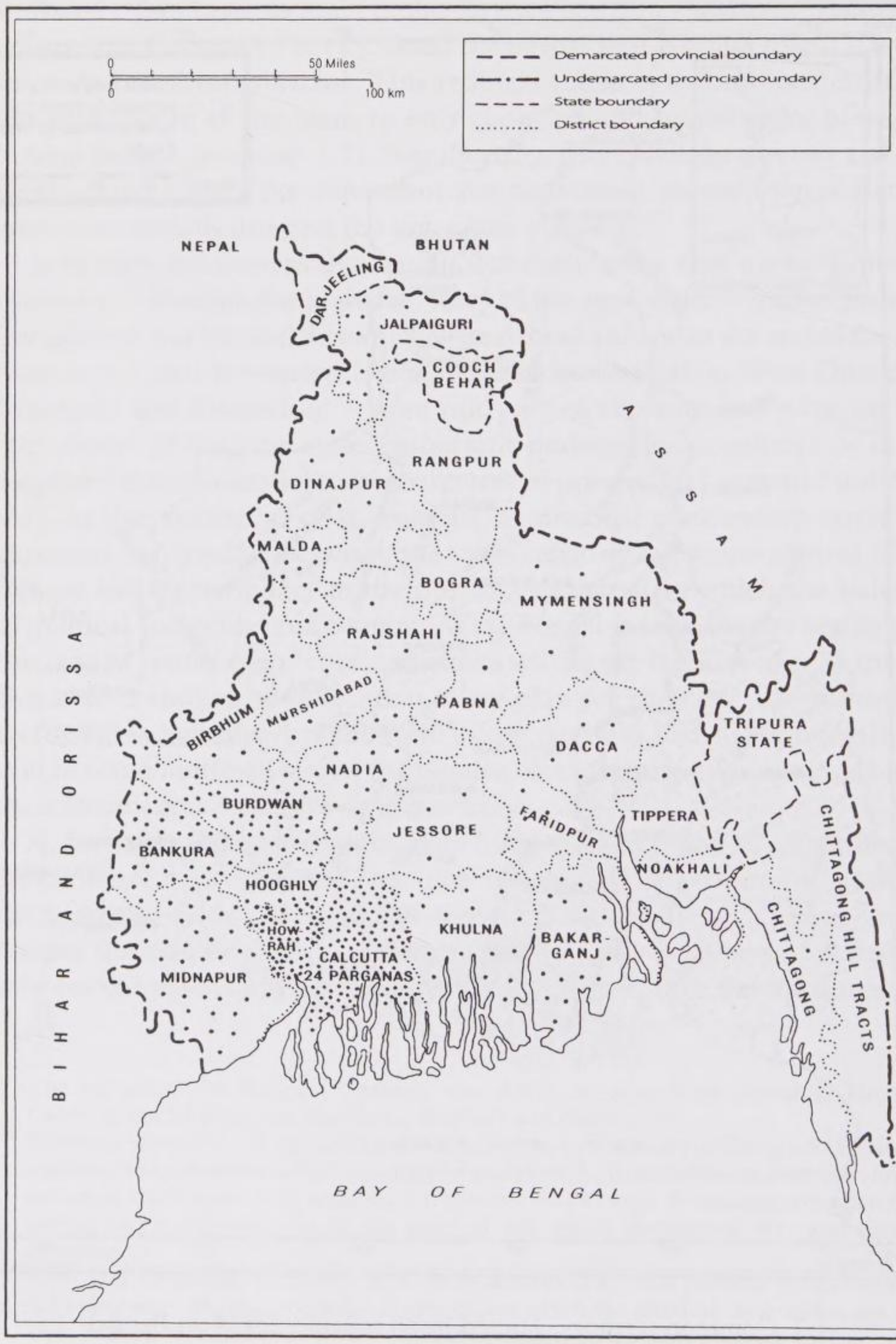
[78] Birbhum, something of a rural backwater on the western borders of Orissa and Bihar, did not show much interest in the campaign for partition. So its inclusion in every plan for the new state owed more to its geographical position and its large Hindu majority than to its having had a vigorous role in the political axis which dominated the campaign for partition.

[79] Core and peripheral territories have been described by one political scientist in the following way: 'the scale of political dislocation which the political class within the core state expects to be associated with efforts to disengage from an outlying territory measures the extent to which that territory has been built, or integrated, into the central state'. See Ian Lustick, 'Thresholds of opportunity and barriers to change in the right-sizing of states' in O'Leary, Lustick and Callaghy, *Right-sizing the state*, p. 82.

[80] Since the emerging dominant political alliance clearly regarded these areas as dispensable, they could be seen, in Lustick's terms, to be weakly integrated into the core or central territory.



1.7 Common territory claimed by all schemes for West Bengal.



1.8 The Hindu campaign for the partition of Bengal: distribution of petitions, by district.

defence of the new state.[81] The authors of every scheme paid very little heed to the strategic implications of the frontier, and hardly any attention to the fact that the re-drawing of frontiers would fundamentally alter, and also in many ways gravely damage, the economy of the new Bengal. The most striking example of this, of course, was the Congress dissidents' plan, which blithely gave away all the tea in Darjeeling and all the water in the Hooghly to get a state in which they could achieve political dominance. But even the sober-sided Congress Plan, by its own admission, did 'not take any account whatsoever of the geographical and consequent economic unity of any region of Bengal'. In contrast to the lengthy and detailed tables submitted on the communal make-up of each police station in Bengal, *The memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission* contains only three, and all of them extremely sketchy, annexures about economic resources, intended to do little more than refute claims made by the Muslim League.[82] In the papers of the parties and the individuals who drafted the various memoranda, there is little evidence that anyone gave thought to the resources of the new state with remotely the same systematic care as they put into their calculations about their political futures.

The one surviving contemporary document that attempts to do this was the little book entitled *The partition of Bengal. A geographical study with maps and diagrams*, published a few months before partition.[83] Written by the geographer S. P. Chatterjee, an expert adviser on the Central Coordination Committee, it might have been expected to have sounded a cautionary note about the likely impact of partition on West Bengal's economy. But in fact Chatterjee's projections about the future were breathtakingly optimistic. No geographer, even in the ivory towers of Calcutta University, could fail to realise that partitioning Bengal would affect its river systems;[84] 'that West Bengal' (or 'Gaur Banga' as Chatterjee rather whimsically decided to call the new state) would be

[81] Indeed, none of the plans made any detailed reference at all to the strategic aspects of the frontier. Perhaps they saw this as a problem for the centre, which, for its part, as we have seen, kept aloof.

[82] One was on Calcutta, the second a brief note on railway workshops and the third an exiguous table showing the net cropped area claimed for West Bengal. This was the sum total of the Bengal Congress's lucubrations on the economy of their new state: *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission*, p. 8.

[83] Head of the Department of Geography at Calcutta University, Chatterjee had been prominent in the campaign to partition Bengal.

[84] Chatterjee saw that 'the destiny of Bengal [lay] in the hands of her mighty rivers'. But he concluded that 'all these rivers have their sources outside the province, [hence] no planning for agricultural reconstruction is possible without the co-operation of the neighbouring provinces through which the rivers flow before reaching Bengal'. He

'deficient' in rice;[85] and that 'Muslim Bengal' would have a monopoly of jute, the main raw material which fed the mills of West Bengal's largest industry. But Chatterjee was confident that these 'deficiencies' could be put to rights so long as 'Gaur Banga' worked together with the all-India centre, and deployed 'new technology' about which this fugleman of the new order appears to have had a somewhat uncertain grasp.[86] As for West Bengal's future revenues, Chatterjee believed that partition would leave almost all 'the principal sources of revenue [of the undivided province] . . . available for [West Bengal]'. Chatterjee claimed that united Bengal's post-war financial crisis had been due primarily to the cost of policing 'communal tension and riots'. So, by relegating communal tension to history (or so he thought), partition would in fact rescue West Bengal from its economic crises of the past and restore it to rude fiscal health.[87] This panglossian forecast concluded that, notwithstanding 'any deficiencies', both parts of a divided Bengal would 'be better off than many independent countries of the world'.[88]

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see that this complacent assessment rested on three sweeping assumptions, all of which proved to be unsafe. First: that all-India would come to West Bengal's aid and would help it to make good deficiencies and iron out disruptions and distortions in the economy of the new state. Second: that the disposition of India's revenues – and West Bengal's share of them – would remain

noted that this was 'all the more vital for Western Bengal where swift running and shallow rivers like the Damodar, the Maurakhi (Mor) etc. can be very easily harnessed for generating water-power and supplying water for irrigation'. Thus, he concluded, a united India would give new strength to its component parts, not least to Bengal (S. P. Chatterjee, *The partition of Bengal*, p. 55).

85 Only seven of Bengal's fifteen districts, Chatterjee realised, would have 'enough rice for home consumption': *ibid.*, p. 59.

86 Chatterjee anticipated that improvements in farming practices, 'modified on the lines of farming practised in Flanders', would alleviate the shortfall of rice. Pointing out that even Britain depended on food imports, he argued that West Bengal, like Britain, would be able to pay for rice imports 'by the exportation of manufactured articles'. He had high hopes for West Bengal's future industrial development, as 'Gaur Banga' would be rich in power and minerals. Indeed, he was confident that West Bengal would continue to lead the manufacturing sector of independent India. That almost all of Bengal's raw jute was in 'Muslim Bengal' did not worry him unduly, since 'each province [would] specialise in certain agricultural products' and 'Gaur Banga' and 'Muslim Bengal' could 'very well exchange its products', and so any shortfall would be made good by mutually beneficial trade between the two parts of Bengal. See S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps. A geographical analysis of resource distribution in West Bengal and Eastern Pakistan*, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, 1948, pp. 55–67.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 67. The same argument was made by members of the Congress party in the Assembly in April 1947, who seem to have been coached by Chatterjee on matters fiscal and economic: *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 April 1947.

88 S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 64.

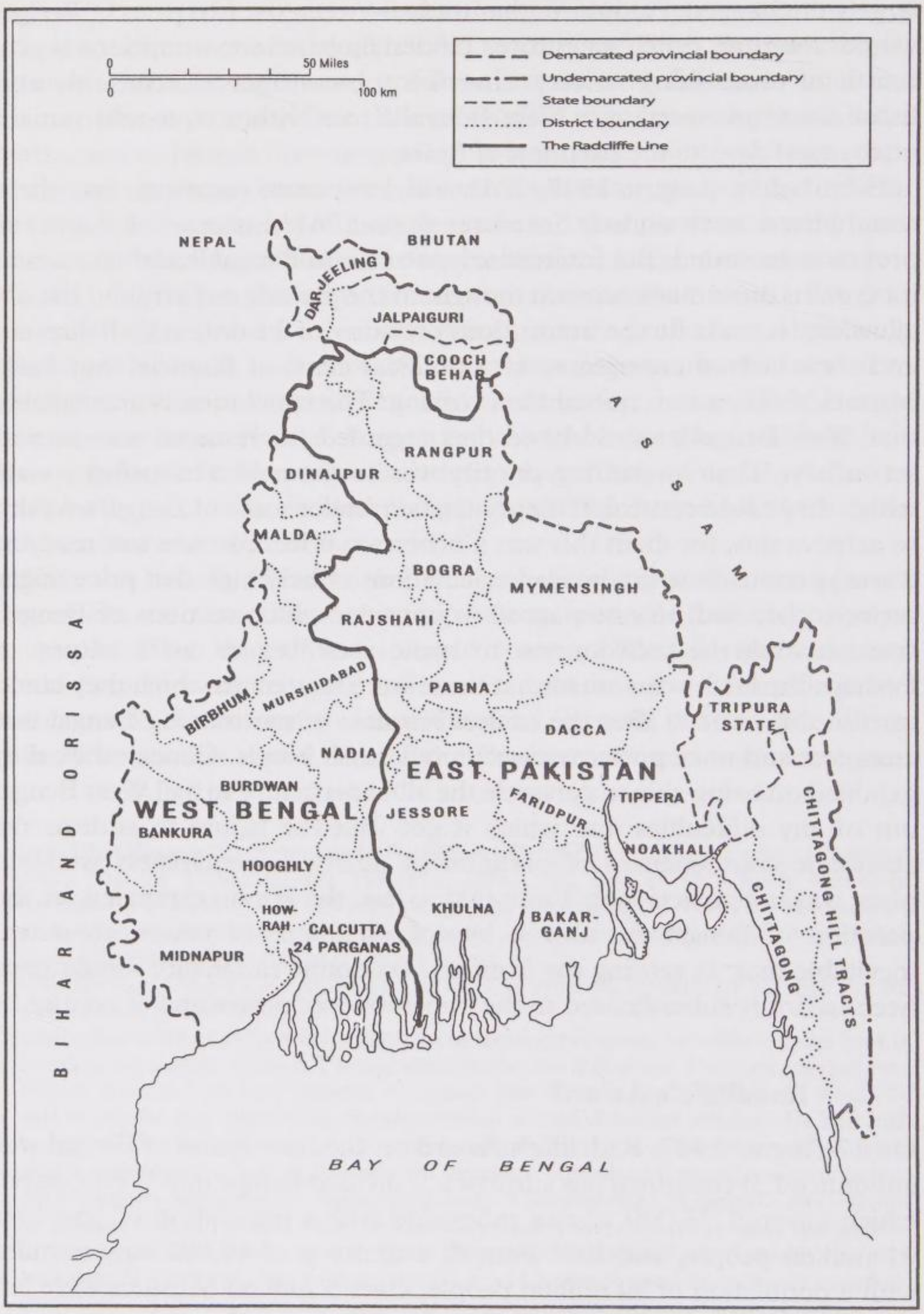
largely unchanged. And third: that trade between the two parts of Bengal would continue much as before. Underlying these assumptions was a fourth of astonishing naivety: that the sub-continental economic and fiscal *status quo ante*, and West Bengal's role within it, would remain unchanged despite the partition of India.

Even before August 1947, it should have been apparent that these assumptions were entirely insecure; since 1947, not one of them has proven to be sound. But interestingly, no Hindu Bengal leader appears to have given these matters much thought in the prelude to partition. Even if allowance is made for the tremendous pressures of the time at their disposal and their lack of experience, as a political class, of financial and fiscal matters, this lacuna is nonetheless striking. The conclusion is unavoidable that West Bengal's would-be leaders regarded the issue of resources as secondary. Their overriding priority was to get a Hindu-majority state which they could control. If they had to surrender some of Bengal's wealth to achieve this, for them this was a necessary price. No one was ready to waste precious time on detailed calculations of how high that price might prove to be, and no one paused to consider which sections of Bengali society would be called upon to make sacrifices in order to pay it. Perhaps the leaders assumed that these were matters to which they could turn in due course, after the critical business of partitioning Bengal was complete and once power was securely in their hands. Conceivably, they gambled on being able to persuade the all-India centre to bail West Bengal out of any difficulties into which it got. But the failure to address the economic consequences of partition in otherwise remarkably well-laid plans was not an accident. From first to last, the Hindu campaign for the partition of Bengal was driven by considerations of power, so it was inevitable that, in settling the frontiers, economic rationality should have been so firmly subordinated to the imperatives of power and of politics.

Radcliffe's Award

On 17 August 1947, Radcliffe's Award on the boundaries of Bengal was announced. It contained few surprises. It divided Bengal into West Bengal, which covered 28,000 square miles and had a population of just over 21 million people, and East Bengal, a territory of 49,000 square miles with a population of 39 million people. Over 5 million Muslims were left in West Bengal and about 11 million Hindus found themselves stranded in the eastern wing of Pakistan[89] (see map 1.9). In an unconscious irony,

[89] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 59–60.



1.9 West and East Pakistan, 1947: the Radcliffe Line.

Radcliffe's line bore a certain resemblance to Curzon's line of 1905 (compare with map 0.1). Significantly, Radcliffe's Award accepted the two 'cardinal principles' that had informed the Congress Plan: first that the two parts into which Bengal was to be divided should contain respectively as many of the total Muslim and Hindu populations of Bengal as possible and, secondly, that 'the ratio of Muslims to Hindu in one zone must be as nearly equal as possible to the ratio of Hindu to Muslims in the other'.[90] The two states created by Radcliffe's Award in fact contained communities of Hindus and Muslims in almost exactly the same but inverse ratios. The Award gave East Bengal a population which was 71 per cent Muslim and West Bengal a population which was 70.8 per cent Hindu. Admittedly, West Bengal got a few more of the Muslims of united Bengal than the Congress would have liked it to contain: had the Congress Plan been followed in its entirety, the figures would have been 77 per cent and 68 per cent respectively.[91] But otherwise what Radcliffe awarded was almost exactly what the Congress wanted. Radcliffe's Award accepted the Congress proposition that the unit for partition should be the thana or police station, being the smallest administrative entity for which there were published census figures.[92] It also went along with the Congress claim, which Atul Gupta had been at pains to stress, about the importance for West Bengal to have the Murshidabad and Nadia river systems if the Hooghly was to survive as an artery of the new state. The Award gave the whole of Murshidabad to West Bengal. On the other hand, Khulna, except for those parts of the district which were to the east of the river Mathabhanga, went to Pakistan, the Award taking its cue on this point also from the Congress's tacit willingness to exchange Hindu-majority Khulna for Muslim-majority Murshidabad. With Khulna, those parts of Faridpur and Bakarganj which were contiguous to Khulna also went to Pakistan. Calcutta, which everyone agreed was the political and economic heart of the province, of course went to West Bengal. It also got the tea-producing districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri,[93] except five thanas in Jalpaiguri in which Muslims were in a majority.[94] In giving these northern

[90] See *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission*, and 'Report of the non-Muslim members', *PP* VI, p. 30.

[91] See *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission*, p. 6.

[92] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[93] 'The Schedule', Sir Cyril Radcliffe's Award, 12 August 1947, in *PP* VI, p. 119.

[94] These were in the Boda-Debiganj-Pachagarh area contiguous to Rangpur. See the telegram from Kaviraj Satish Chandra Lahiry to J. B. Kripalani, dated 4 September 1947 in AICC-I, G-33/1947–48; and Das Gupta, *Economy, society and politics in Bengal*, pp. 237–9.

districts to West Bengal despite the fact that they were not contiguous to the rest of the province, Radcliffe rejected the Muslim League's contention that 'contiguity' *within* Bengal had to be the overriding principle of the Award.[95]

So in principle and in practice the Radcliffe Award looked remarkably like the Congress Plan. One point, however, in which the Award failed to follow the Congress Plan was the Congress's insistence that its new boundaries must run in a continuous and unbroken line.[96] Radcliffe did not give West Bengal the continuous boundary which would have required him to carve out a corridor connecting the two north Bengal districts with the rest of the new province. As it was, the Award left parts of West Bengal separated from each other by land which went to Pakistan or by land belonging to other Indian states.[97] West Bengal did not get a direct territorial link with its northern districts until 1956, when the States Reorganisation Committee gave it a narrow strip of Bihar, which at last joined together the two parts of the state which had been unconnected since August 1947.[98]

Historians can only speculate why Radcliffe accepted the Congress Plan to such an extent. The Award, brief, bald and brutal, gave no hint of Radcliffe's thinking. Once it was made, Radcliffe prudently refused to say a word about it.[99] It could be that if Bengal had to be partitioned, the moderate Congress Plan made the most sense. Suffice it to note that the Award and Congress Plan were, if not identical twins, at least very much like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, fine fellows both with little to mark them apart.

[95] However, by way of compensation, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which had a non-Muslim and mainly tribal majority, and which were contiguous to Assam but not to West Bengal, went to East Pakistan, much to the chagrin of the Congress high command, which had given its followers in Chittagong assurances (it is hard to tell on what conceivable basis) that the Tracts would come to India. The Tracts had never been claimed for West Bengal. So this fascinating little vignette, a sub-plot in the extraordinary tale of the Radcliffe Award, should be discussed, but in another place.

[96] See point two of the 'Guiding Rules' set out in *Memorandum on the partition of Bengal presented on behalf of the Indian National Congress before the Bengal Boundary Commission*.

[97] Justifying a corridor for West Bengal after Nehru had denounced Jinnah's demand for a corridor to link West and East Pakistan as 'fantastic and absurd' would no doubt have been a trifle difficult: A. Campbell-Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten*, London, 1985, pp. 94–6.

[98] *Report of the States Reorganisation Commission*, New Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1955, pp. 174–80.

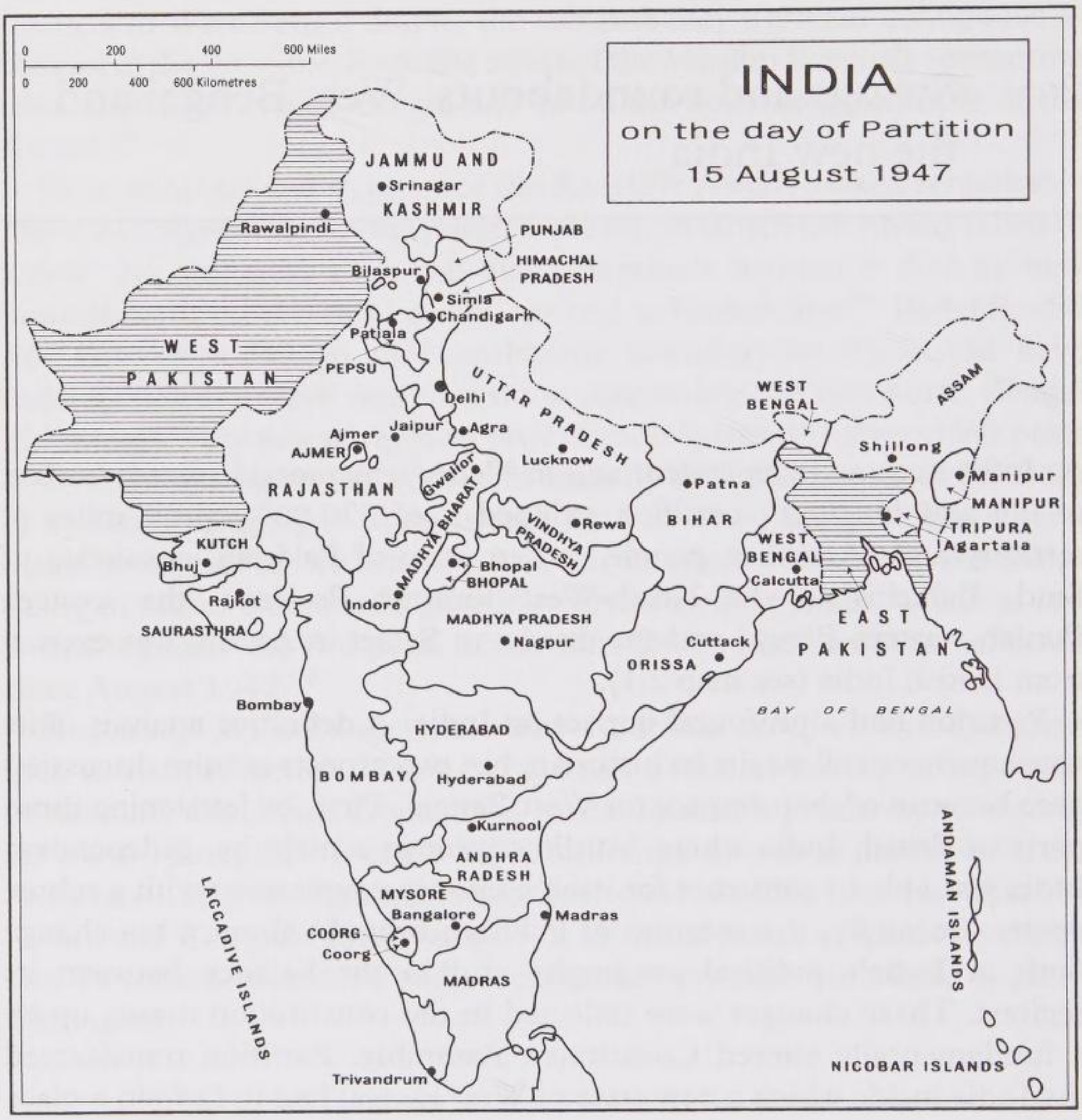
[99] H. V. Hodson, *The great divide. Britain, India, Pakistan*, London, 1969, p. 353. See also the interesting research, the results of which are still somewhat inconclusive, in Chester, 'Drawing the Indo-Pakistani boundary'.

2 Swings and roundabouts: West Bengal and the new India

As India became independent and in Nehru's memorable words 'awoke to life and freedom', partition stripped it of 370,000 square miles of territory and 75 million people. A new state of Pakistan, consisting of Sind, Baluchistan, the North-West Frontier Province, the western Punjab, eastern Bengal and the district of Sylhet in Assam, was excised from British India (see map 2.1).

Partition had a profound impact on India. A definitive analysis of its consequences still awaits its historian, but two aspects require discussion here because of their impact on West Bengal. First, by jettisoning those parts of British India where Muslims were in a majority, independent India was able to construct for itself a unitary government with a robust centre. Secondly, the creation of Pakistan brought about a sea-change both in India's political geography and in the balance between its regions. These changes were reflected in the constitution drawn up by a fundamentally altered Constituent Assembly. Partition transformed the India inside which a new state of West Bengal had to fashion a place for itself.

That India would have a strong centre after partition was a foregone conclusion. The Congress had pressed for a limited partition in 1947 precisely in order to achieve a unitary state with a powerful central authority, and by accepting that demand, Attlee's announcement of June 3 cleared the way for the Congress high command to create for India the constitution it really wanted. A strong centre was a vital legacy of the British Raj, and the Congress was determined to inherit it intact. Ever since North's Regulating Act of 1773, India had been governed from the centre. Whatever limited say in the running of their affairs the provinces had been allowed by the Government of India Acts of 1920 and 1935, British strategy in India during the twentieth century, as historians have come to realise, was to hold on to the vital attributes of sovereignty by a retreat to the centre. Until the British divided and quit, power was kept 'centralised and always in British



2.1 India and Pakistan in 1947.

hands'.[1] For its part, the Congress high command remained steadfastly committed to capturing the centre with its powers undiminished inside independent India. In 1928, Motilal Nehru had publicly stated what already had become Congress dogma, that India had to have a strong central government. In 1936, Jawaharlal Nehru had echoed his father when he reiterated that in a 'free India . . . there must be a great deal of unitary control'.[2] In 1945, the Sapru Committee repeated the high command's article of faith that 'a strong Centre was most necessary in

[1] Granville Austin, *The Indian constitution. Cornerstone of a nation*, Bombay, 2000, p. 189. See also P. J. Thomas, *The growth of federal finance in India. Being a survey of India's public finances from 1833 to 1939*, Oxford, 1939.

[2] Reported in *Indian Annual Register, 1936*, II, Calcutta, 1937, p. 226.

India'[3] – a few of the many signposts which all pointed in one direction: the leaders of the All-India Congress were convinced that when India achieved independence it would need a vigorous centre with powers sufficiently strong to hold together a fissiparous and disparate nation.

After the Second World War, as the British prepared to quit their Indian empire, their reasons for wanting a strong centre for free India became even more pressing. The war had ravaged the country. Two years after Japan had been bombed into surrender, food in India was still very expensive and in short supply, and there was not enough cloth in the market. Shortages of coal increased the costs of transporting everyday necessities to the places where they were consumed.[4] To prevent another disaster on the scale of the Bengal famine of 1943, one of independent India's immediate challenges was to tackle inflation and get enough food to the people at prices they could afford to pay.[5] That required government to slap controls on prices and to take charge of the supply of essential commodities, particularly coal and textiles. Since badly paid workers were growing more restive by the day, government also had to take charge of labour policy. State-led development of industry and agriculture – in other words centralised planning and control of the economy – was seen as a prerequisite if independent India were to feed and clothe its people. Another urgent reason why government needed a strong centre was to restore and maintain law and order in a country where social controls were cracking under the pressures of war, famine and communal conflict. Time and again provincial governments had shown that they had neither the will nor the wherewithal to stem the rising tides of civil violence, whether in Calcutta, Bihar, Gurgaon or Rawalpindi. As Nehru warned the Chamber of Princes on 8 February 1947, unless something drastic were done soon, 'the whole of India [would] be a cauldron within six months'.[6] Yet another imperative task facing India's new government was to cajole or to coerce the Princes into the union. Central power was also vital to hold at bay the particularisms of language and region which had already begun to threaten India's fragile unities. To pull India back from the abyss of disorder and to prevent a collapse of government's authority, the Congress had to have a powerful unitary centre. The Muslim League had a different agenda: it wanted 'group'

[3] The Constitutional Proposals of the Sapru Committee, 1946, p. 177, cited in Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 190.
[4] For an account of the war in Asia, see C. A. Bayly and T. N. Harper, *Forgotten armies. The fall of British Asia, 1941–1945*, London, 2004.
[5] 'Important tasks facing the Interim Government', memorandum dated 19 August 1946, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. I-1/46–47.
[6] Rajendra Prasad Papers, File 11-C/46-7-8, cited in Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 190.

autonomy for the Muslim-majority provinces and parity at a weak all-India federal centre. If the League had succeeded in its demands, the centre's powers would have been fatally compromised. The Muslim League was seen as the biggest threat to independent India's security and integrity because it sought states' rights for Muslim provinces, in its own peculiarly dangerous and potent mix of provincialism and communalism.[7]

In its 16 May Plan, the Cabinet Mission had proposed a resolution to the impasse between the Congress and the League. It would have given undivided India a government with three tiers, where central authority at the top would have been limited to foreign affairs, defence and communications. Below this feeble, indeed virtually impotent, centre, 'groups' of Muslim-majority provinces in the tier below would have been accorded an unprecedented degree of autonomy. From the moment the Constituent Assembly first met in December 1946 until the big change in the 3 June 1947 announcement, when the 16 May Cabinet Mission Plan was finally abandoned, the best legal and political minds in the Congress had tried by one means or another to give the intrinsically weak centre envisaged by the Cabinet Mission some teeth to fortify its limited authority. But in the end this proved to be an impossible task. However broadly the Congress sought to interpret the limited scope and powers which the Cabinet Mission had allowed the centre to have, their efforts broke on the hard rocks of states' rights and of 'group' rights.[8] So the Congress bitterly criticised the Mission's attempt to square the circle. K. M. Munshi,[9] a leading voice in the Union Powers Committee, set out the position in his typically blunt and vivid fashion when he described the 16 May Plan as a 'parricide's bag':

[7] The argument is not that Jinnah was a provincialist. Indeed, as historians after Ayesha Jalal have recognised, what the Quaid-i-Azam really wanted was a say for the Muslims at a centre strong enough to protect the minority. This strategy, however, required Jinnah to have the support of the leaders of the Muslim-majority provinces. By one of the great ironies of Indian history, winning that support forced Jinnah, in his turn, to claim to be a champion of provincial autonomy, when by inclination and by policy he was in fact a liberal nationalist committed to running India's (and indeed Pakistan's) affairs from the centre where his entire political career had been spent. See Ayesha Jalal, *The sole spokesman. Jinnah, the Muslim League and the demand for Pakistan*, Cambridge, 1985.

[8] 'Report of the Union Powers Committee to the Constituent Assembly', Appendix B, *Constituent Assembly of India Debates* (12 vols.), Lok Sabha Secretariat, Government of India Press, Faridabad, 1947 (henceforth *CAD*), vol. III, pp. 395–8.

[9] K. M. Munshi, a leading figure in the Bombay Congress and home minister in the Bombay ministry from 1937 to 1939, had resigned from the Congress in 1941. Nevertheless, he was closely involved in drafting the framework of the constitution from the front benches of the Constituent Assembly and was a member of two crucial bodies, the Drafting Committee and the Union Powers Committee. Later, from 1950 to 1952, he was minister of food and agriculture in Nehru's government and then governor of Uttar Pradesh from 1952 to 1956.

While examining the plan of 16 May over and over again, the plan looked to me more like the parricide's bag which was invented by ancient Roman law . . . when a man committed a very heinous crime he was tied up in a bag with a monkey, a snake and a cock and the bag was thrown into the Tiber till it sank. The more we saw the plan the more we found the minority struggling to get loose, the sections [groups of Muslim-majority provinces] gnawing at the vitals and the double-majority clause poisoning the very existence . . .[10]

After sacrificing 'a strong Central Government', Munshi declared, all the Plan left India was 'an attenuated unity which would not have lasted longer than the making of it'.[11]

In the end, these flaws in the Cabinet Mission Plan drove the Congress leadership to look to partition as the solution, since excising the Muslim-majority districts from India was the only way it could get a strong central government. But while demanding partition, the Congress also fought to keep for India the territories it needed and to give Pakistan only the barest minimum that demography dictated; and this lay behind its determination that Bengal and the Punjab too would have to be divided.

It was this agenda of the Congress high command which made it possible for Bengal's Hindus to get a state of their own. But, equally, that same agenda set the parameters of what the provinces could or could not do in independent India once the 3 June Plan had ensured it would have a powerful centre. Munshi's reaction to Attlee's 3 June announcement gives a sense of the huge relief with which the Congress leadership received the news that at last it could go full steam ahead and create the constitution it actually wanted:

I feel – thank God – that we have got out of this bag at last. We have no sections and groups to go into, no elaborate procedure as was envisaged by it, no double-majority clause, no more provinces with residuary powers, no opting out, no revision after ten years, and no longer only four categories of power for the centre. *We therefore feel free to form a federation of our choice, a federation with a centre as strong as we can make it* . . . Therefore, Sir, I personally am not at all sorry that this change has taken place. *We have now a homogenous country, though our frontiers have shrunk.*[12]

The all-India leaders of the Congress and their Hindu satraps in Bengal thus had some aims in common. They both wanted a homogeneous polity over which they could stamp their authority. Both had decided that a partition that rid them of Muslim majorities was the way to achieve such a polity. But there were critical differences between the Congress at the centre and the Congress in Bengal. At the centre, the Congress would

[10] See Munshi's speech in which he moved the Report of the Order of Business Committee, 14 July 1947, *CAD* IV, p. 544.
[11] *Ibid.* [12] *Ibid.*, p. 545 (emphasis added).

inherit a working apparatus of government, over which it had had at least partial charge since 1946 when the interim government took office. The Congress was also in charge of the Constituent Assembly, where it had an overwhelming majority. Moreover, since the 1920s, the party's high command had tightened its grip over its provincial barons and had used its authority to impose a highly centralised constitution upon them. Partitioning India was a decision taken by the Congress at the centre playing from strength. By contrast, the Bengal Congress achieved the partition of their province from a position of fundamental weakness. For their part, the Bengal Hindu leaders demanded partition because they hoped that in a new and smaller province they would win back power and control which they had lost and at the same time regain a measure of influence on the all-India stage.

During the next two and a half years, in hammering out India's new constitution, the Constituent Assembly had to settle how to share power between the centre and the provinces. After 3 June, the outcome was not in doubt: the centre intended to arrogate to itself all the powers it needed. Yet the precise ways in which the rules were framed reflected subtle, but nonetheless significant, shifts in the balance between one province and another and between the provinces and New Delhi. The story of how West Bengal tried to steer a way through the transactions of the Constituent Assembly is a revealing commentary on the strategy of its leaders. It also demonstrates how the all-India bosses tilted the balance at the centre against Bengal, leaving the province as an extra or a bit player on a stage where it had hoped, however unrealistically, once again to play a leading role.

'Wrecking from within': Bengal and the Cabinet Mission Plan

In December 1946, when the Constituent Assembly of India met for the first time, the decision to partition India had not yet been taken. For six months, the would-be makers of India's constitution struggled in vain to design a workable instrument within the terms and constraints of the Cabinet Mission Plan of 16 May 1946. In July 1946, the provincial legislatures elected the Assembly's members as the Cabinet Mission Plan had determined, with each province having one member in the Assembly for every million of its population. The different communities in the provinces elected their representatives to the Assembly separately, again in proportion to their relative size.[13] According to these rules,

[13] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 5.

communities other than the Muslims in the provincial assemblies elected 214 representatives out of the total of 292 members in the Constituent Assembly which British India had been allocated and Muslims elected the remaining 78. In addition, another 93 seats in the Assembly were reserved for representatives of the princely states.[14]

When the Assembly convened, the Muslim League members, who had won most of the seats reserved for Muslims, decided to boycott its proceedings. They were convinced that the Congress intended to flout the provisions for 'grouping' Muslim provinces, which the League regarded as a vital part of the Cabinet Mission Plan. With a few exceptions, the representatives of the princely states also chose not to have anything to do with the Assembly. In consequence, those who took their seats were in the main members of the Congress, which had won 208 of the 214 'non-Muslim' seats in the Assembly.[15]

Of the Congressmen, members from undivided Bengal were a large contingent. The Cabinet Mission had allotted Bengal, as the province with the largest population, sixty seats in the Central Assembly, more than one in five of the total of general seats (see table 2.1). Of these sixty seats, twenty-seven were reserved for Hindus. At its inaugural session on 9 December 1946, the twenty-seven Hindu members from Bengal were a strong presence in the Assembly, one in six of all those who were there.

From the start, the Bengal Hindu contingent took the lead in the Assembly in pressing for greater powers for the centre. This was not because the Bengalis were the centre's placemen – in fact most of them were there not as nominees of the high command but because they were men of stature and with a measure of popular support in Bengal. Notable among them were Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, who was not a Congressman; Sarat Chandra Bose, who had led the rebellion in Bengal against the Congress high command; Kiran Sankar Roy, who had joined Bose in pressing for a sovereign united Bengal; the former terrorist Surendra Mohan Ghosh; and the communist leader Somnath Lahiri.[16] Mookerjee was an eloquent advocate of a strong

[14] 'Statement by the Cabinet Delegation and his Excellency the Viceroy', Appendix II in Penderel Moon (ed.), *Wavell. The viceroy's journal*, London, 1973, p. 477.

[15] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, pp. 9–10. A few of its leading members, including A. K. Ayyar, H. N. Kunzru, Dr Ambedkar, K. Santhanam and M. R. Jayakar, did not belong to the Congress, but were elected to the Assembly on the explicit say-so of the Congress Working Committee, which needed their particular talents in the Assembly. In effect nominees of the Congress, these distinguished men were treated as paid-up members of the Congress Assembly Party and took full part in debating and deciding policy: *ibid.*, pp. 13, 23.

[16] Other notables from Bengal in the Constituent Assembly were Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, soon to become the first premier (as the post of chief minister was known until 1950) of

Table 2.1. *The Constituent Assembly of India: seats allocated by the Cabinet Mission, 1946*

	General	Muslim	Sikh	Total
SECTION A				
Madras	45	4	—	49
Bombay	19	2	—	21
United Provinces	47	8	—	55
Bihar	31	5	—	36
Central Provinces	16	1	—	17
Orissa	9	0	—	9
SECTION B				
Punjab	8	16	4	28
North-West Frontier Province	0	3	0	3
Sind	1	3	0	4
SECTION C				
Bengal	27	33	—	60
Assam	7	3	—	10
TOTAL	210	78	4	292

Source: Based on 'Statement by the Cabinet Delegation and his Excellency the Viceroy', in P. Moon (ed.), *Wavell. The Viceroy's journal*, London, 1973, pp. 471–80.

centre and was one of the first to speak in the Assembly on this issue. On 13 December 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru moved the opening resolution on the 'Aims and Objects' of the Assembly. As the Cabinet Mission Plan had determined, these gave residuary powers to the provinces.[17] It was Mookerjee, from Bengal, who jumped to his feet and used his considerable presence and authority to draw the Assembly's attention to 'one matter on which many of us hold divergent views, namely, the question of residuary powers. Some of us differ from that standpoint and *urge a stronger Centre in India's paramount interest.*'[18] Of course, as long as the makers of the constitution remained bound by the constraints of the Cabinet Mission Plan, such calls for a powerful centre were tilting at the proverbial windmill. But it is significant that Mookerjee from Bengal was the first one to wield his lance in a cause so dear to the high command.

West Bengal; Hem Chandra Naskar, later minister for fisheries in the West Bengal government; Prafulla Chandra Sen, leader of the Hooghly group, who became minister for civil supplies and, after Dr B. C. Roy's death, chief minister of West Bengal; and other lesser stars in the Bengal firmament such as Satya Ranjan Bakshi, Suresh Banerjee, Leela Ray and J. C. Mazumdar.

17 Resolution on 'Aims and Objects' moved by Jawaharlal Nehru, 13 December 1946, *CAD* I, p. 59.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 95 (emphasis added).

Members from Bengal were also the most vocal opponents of the notion that 'groups' or 'sections' should be given autonomy. One of the first tasks of the Assembly was to frame the rules by which its proceedings would be governed so, on day two of the inaugural session, Acharya Kripalani proposed the appointment of a committee to draft 'Rules of Procedure'. This apparently uncontroversial proposal gave Suresh Banerjee from Bengal the opportunity to enquire whether the rules would also apply to the 'groups'. When told that they would not, he tabled an amendment that the Rules Committee should include the 'groups' under its remit.[19] This was not a mere technicality. It was a clever tactic: the Cabinet Mission Plan had given the groups the right to frame their own rules independently from the centre, but a 'central' Rules Committee was arrogating that right to itself instead. By this device, Banerjee intended to undermine the autonomy of the Muslim-majority 'sections'. Undivided Bengal and Assam formed one of the two Muslim sections, and the undivided Punjab was the core of the other. It is significant that this move to sabotage the autonomy of the Muslim sections was proposed by a Bengali Hindu and won support not only from other members from Bengal – including Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Sarat Bose and Debi Prasad Khaitan, a Marwari industrialist from Calcutta, all of whom spoke up in favour of Suresh Banerjee's amendment – but also from members from Assam and from the Punjab.[20] Just as the Hindu political classes of Bengal, the Hindu and Sikh minorities of the Punjab and the Hindus of Assam were dismayed by the prospect of being bundled into groups dominated by large Muslim majorities. Any means by which they could undermine the autonomy of groups inside which they were condemned to be impotent minorities was grist to their mills. From the perspective of these non-Muslim minorities, it made entirely good sense to use any and every expedient to strengthen the centre's powers over the groups, since only a strong centre would give them a measure of protection against the power of Muslims in the sections and groups which they dominated.[21]

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[20] Sardar Harnam Singh and Sardar Ujjal Singh from the Punjab spoke up in support of the amendment, as did Basanta Kumar Das from Assam: *ibid.*, pp. 24–5. The referendum in the Assamese district of Sylhet had settled that Assam, too, would be partitioned and that Sylhet would join Pakistan.

[21] There is, of course, an interesting but somewhat ironical symmetry between this campaign by non-Muslim minorities and the revival of the Muslim League in the 1930s and 1940s. The Muslim League's recovery, as most historians now agree, was driven by the ambitions of small but powerful Muslim elites from the United Provinces, who had been consigned by the coming of representative politics and provincial autonomy to a political wilderness in which they would be a hopeless minority. Cross-communal alliances fell out of favour in these provinces, in part the result of the logic of the political arithmetic of the

Banerjee's amendment was carried.[22] It was no coincidence that the very first amendment for which the Constituent Assembly voted was designed to strengthen the centre. Nor was it fortuitous that it was proposed not by the Congress high command but by a representative from Bengal, and that it was backed by Hindu and Sikh spokesmen from the three provinces – Bengal, the Punjab and Assam – which were to be partitioned just eight months later. Of course, the demand for a strong centre had powerful backing from the Congress high command. But the push for it gained momentum from a reciprocal drive mounted by vocal Hindu and Sikh minorities from Muslim-majority provinces.

The 3 June Plan and West Bengal

Attlee's 'Partition' Plan of 3 June 1947 transformed the situation in the Constituent Assembly overnight. Muslim-majority 'groups' were consigned to oblivion and nothing now stood in the way of the strong centre which the Congress high command had always wanted. As Sardar Panikkar, constitutional expert and member of the Union Constitution Committee, put it, the announcement of 3 June meant that 'it [was] no longer necessary to provide for a very large measure of power for the Units, which a full Union with the Muslim majority provinces would have rendered unavoidable', and the 'basic principle of the Constitution' was now that it 'be ... unitary'.[23] Two days later, on 5 June 1947, the committee finally shoved the Cabinet Mission Plan and all its complex proposals through the trapdoor of history.[24] The very next day, on 6 June, the Union Constitution Committee met, unencumbered at last by the constraints of the past six months. Without further ado, it declared that 'the Constitution would be federal with a strong centre' and that 'residuary powers should vest in the Union government'.[25]

Communal Award and of the 1935 act. The only hope of Muslim minorities stemming an otherwise inevitable decline into political irrelevance lay in seeking a strong Muslim spokesman at the centre. This was the role that Jinnah took upon himself. In a parallel development, many Hindus in undivided Bengal saw their predicament in similar terms to Muslims on the all-India stage.

22 Indeed, Acharya Kripalani's speech accepting the amendment was applauded by the Assembly: *CAD* I, p. 30.

23 K. M. Panikkar, *Note on some general principles of the Union Constitution*, Bikaner, 1947, in Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 3-C/47.

24 On 5 June, the Union and Provincial Constitution Committees, whose members included most of the important members of the Congress leadership, met in joint session and declared that the statement of June 3 meant that the Cabinet Mission Plan no longer applied to the Assembly: Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 193.

25 *Ibid.*; Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 3-C/47.

The decision to partition India had other large consequences. It fundamentally altered the role of Bengal's Hindu representatives in the Constituent Assembly. They no longer represented a minority interest in a Muslim-majority province; they were now the spokesmen of a province of their own. From being an 'out' group under the sway of 'Muslim tyranny', they had become insiders, masters of their own house, albeit a rather smaller dwelling than undivided Bengal had been. It also altered the relationship in the Assembly between those who spoke for West Bengal and those who represented the centre. But instead of responding to these changes by adopting a stance dictated by their new and very different provincial perspective, or at least curbing their unfettered enthusiasm for the centre and its causes, West Bengal's spokesmen reacted in complex and unexpected ways. The main burden of this chapter will be to look at these changes and see what they reveal about the perceptions of West Bengal's leaders, particularly about the new province's future role in independent India.

Within a week, the 3 June declaration had altered the composition of the Constituent Assembly beyond recognition. The seats in the Assembly for the territories about to become 'Pakistan' were abolished; and so were the seats of those princes whose states fell outside India. At a stroke, the Assembly's membership was reduced by about a hundred, almost a third of the size originally decreed in the Cabinet Mission Plan. But since those who had the seats which were abolished had in the main boycotted the Assembly from its first session in December 1946 until 3 June 1947, these changes, while enormously important, did not have a visible impact on who actually came to the Assembly. The most tangible change was felt by the Hindu contingent from Bengal and Assam, and the Hindus and Sikhs from the Punjab. On 8 June 1947, the Joint Sub-Committee of the Union Constitution and Provincial Constitution Committees met and decided that 'the members now in the Constituent Assembly representing provinces which will be divided, including Assam, *will vacate their seats* as soon as a division is decided on according to the procedure in the June 3rd Statement. Each of the Provincial Legislative Assemblies will then elect to the Constituent Assembly the *revised quotas*.'[26]

This ruling dramatically reduced the size of the Bengal cohort in the Constituent Assembly. Before 3 June, undivided Bengal had had, as has been noted, sixty seats in the Assembly and the Hindus from Bengal had had twenty-seven, or almost half, giving them a particularly powerful say in

[26] Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 3-C/1947 (emphasis added). The committee also appointed a sub-committee to examine the effect of the 'secession' of certain areas and on 'the title of certain members of the Assembly belonging to Pakistan areas but returned by provincial assemblies in the non-Pakistan areas'.

the making of the constitution. The 'revised quota' gave West Bengal a quarter of the previous number, or just sixteen seats in all. Only twelve of them were for Hindus, less than half their previous allocation.[27] Sarat Bose, who together with all the other Bengal representatives had to resign his seat, failed to be re-elected to the Constituent Assembly. Nor was Syama Prasad Mookerjee re-elected. When Mookerjee later returned to the Assembly, he came back as a minister of the central government, not as a representative of West Bengal.[28] Kiran Sankar Roy, atypically, went home to Pakistan and took up a seat in the East Bengal Assembly. The bosses of the two most important Congress factions, Surendra Mohan Ghosh and Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, made no attempt to get back into the Assembly and instead concentrated on provincial affairs. Their places in the Assembly were taken by people who could not remotely be described as heavyweights in Bengal's politics, men such as H. C. Mookerjee, a Christian former head of Calcutta University's English department, and Lakshmi Kanta Maitra, who had represented Bengal at the centre in the past, but with no particular distinction.[29] During the crucial months when the constitution was being finalised, the contingent which spoke for West Bengal in the Assembly had thus been reduced to a shadow of its former self, both in size and in standing. The tall poppies of Bengal had either been cut down or had gone back to what they did best, bending in the wind to gain local advantage in Calcutta, leaving it to less substantial politicians to represent them in the Assembly at the centre.

It seems that Dr Rajendra Prasad, as president of the Assembly, took upon himself the task of settling the 'revised quotas' for the 'partition provinces'. There is no record of how this came about. Even before its borders were finally drawn, it was clear that West Bengal would have a population of at least 20 million. Thus, even by the most rough-and-ready calculus, the new province was entitled to at least twenty seats in the Assembly. In fact, Prasad gave it just sixteen. Hindus, who would make up about four-fifths of West Bengal's population, should have had at least sixteen seats. Instead, Prasad gave them twelve. Bengal did not protest

[27] Three were Muslims; a fourth was an Anglo-Indian. See the list of new members from West Bengal who presented their credentials on 14, 15 and 16 July 1947: *CAD* IV, pp. 540ff.

[28] Hereafter, the high command used vacancies in the Assembly to shoehorn in members likely to help it get its way: Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Maulana Azad, K. C. Neogy and Dr Ambedkar were elected in this way to the Assembly. See Rajendra Prasad Papers, File 1-E/47. In the following two years, Mookerjee's main role was to push through amendments and bills that fortified central control over labour matters, trade and commerce, particularly in key commodities. See *CAD* VII(ii)/1948–49, pp. 1283–4, and *CAD* VIII, pp. 401–2.

[29] Among the others were Satis Chandra Samanta, R. Ghatak and Basanta Kumar Das.

against these slashing cuts: it was left to a maverick from the United Provinces, Sri Prakasa, to challenge the quotas as 'improper, unjust, illegal and contrary to the rules'. Rajendra Prasad rejected this complaint on the grounds that no one from Bengal or the Punjab had objected and ruled that the quotas could be left as they were. Significantly, even after this heated exchange, not a single representative from West Bengal spoke up against the arbitrary and high-handed way in which a matter so vital to the interests of their new state had been decided.[30]

Ten days later, on 23 July 1947, the silent dozen from West Bengal belatedly found their voice and wrote a frank letter to Prasad. This letter, which deserves to be quoted at length, provides an insight into how the Bengalis perceived their relationship with the centre:

> The province of Bengal, on partition, has been made into two provinces . . . This decision has brought changes of such far-reaching character in all the fields of administration that the new province would not be able to function without a close and effective co-operation with the Dominion Government at the Centre. Many new problems confound the new cabinet of West Bengal which call for immediate and satisfactory solution. Apart from the question of day-to-day administration, there is also the question of development projects and the problem of food which demand special consideration for which purposes the particular attention of the Central Government are essential.
>
> It will be realised that the Eastern boundary of west Bengal will constitute the frontier of the Indian Union and the contiguity of a sovereign independent state with different ideas and methods is sure to add fresh complications to the already difficult and delicate situation in the newly formed province.
>
> There are also questions of financial allocations from the Centre without which the pressing problems of the new province can in no way be effectively tackled.
>
> It is the common desire of us all that the Government at the Centre should be made as strong as possible. At the same time it is necessary to create a psychological change in the mental attitude of the people of West Bengal that its governance must henceforth be in full concord with the policy pursued by the Government at the Centre to ensure which it is essential that West Bengal should be accorded representation on the Dominion Cabinet . . . who commands the respect and confidence of all.

Exuding confidence that the centre would be West Bengal's special friend in times of trouble, the letter ended by asking for one of the two influential Bengalis, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee or Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, to be given a seat in the cabinet in Delhi.[31]

[30] *CAD* IV, pp. 540–3.

[31] H. C. Mookerjee, Suresh Chandra Mazumdar, Prafulla Chandra Sen, Basanta Kumar Das, Renuka Ray, Satis Chandra Samanta, Lakshmi Kanta Maitra, Upendranath Barman, D. S. Gurung, R. Ghatak, Arun Chandra Guha and Debi Prasad Khaitan to Dr Rajendra Prasad, 23 July 1947, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1-B/47.

Without any guile, this letter spelt out West Bengal's hopes about its future relationship with the all-India centre. Its politicians thought that they would win more on the swings of an alliance with the centre than they would lose on the roundabouts of partition. By this time even the most complacent in West Bengal had begun to realise that partition would create intractable problems which only help from the centre would enable them to resolve. Once in office, the new 'shadow' government recognised how desperately short of food the province was. Its economy, already in trouble, would be savagely disrupted, its lines of communication snapped, its transport systems broken. Hugely expensive 'development projects' were needed to put things right. 'Financial allocations' from the centre were essential in order to solve the 'pressing problems which it [Bengal] faced'. Put simply, West Bengal, as it emerged battered and broken by partition, desperately needed help from the centre and so, the Bengalis calculated, the centre had to be strong and capable of coming effectively to its aid. That meant having a centre with the authority to raise resources and to dole them out in disproportionate shares, to states which needed them most rather than to those which had paid in the most. West Bengal was a border zone, so it had also to rely on the centre for its defence and security. Depending as it did on 'close and active co-operation' with the centre, new Bengal decided it had to 'be in full concord' with the policies and politicians of New Delhi.

The letter also contained an offer of a compact. West Bengal would support the high command in the Constituent Assembly to get as strong a centre as it possibly could. In return, the province expected its voice to be heard at the centre, as well as having the centre's support for the reconstruction of a province which in its own way was as truncated and moth-eaten as the Pakistan which partition gave Jinnah and the League.

History does not record whether Rajendra Prasad replied to this remarkable epistle. But shortly afterwards – on 4 August – Nehru appointed Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee to his cabinet.[32] Whether or not the high command intended this as a hint to the Bengalis that it saw merit in a compact will never be known. But it seems likely that, for their part, H. C. Mookerjee and his colleagues in the Constituent Assembly thought that they had struck a bargain. That Mookerjee, the mild-mannered professor of no particular distinction, was soon afterwards elevated to the position of vice-president of the Assembly may have appeared to confirm that a pact had indeed been made.

[32] Jawaharlal Nehru to Mountbatten, 4 August 1947, *TP* XII, No. 332, pp. 501–2.

This may help to explain the line which West Bengal's motley dozen took in the Assembly in 1947 and 1948. They lay remarkably low, even in the context of the general 'absence of conflict' between the 'centralisers' and the 'provincialists' in the drafting of India's constitution.[33] Except for the rare occasions when something cropped up which was of particular concern to West Bengal, they kept mum or acted as a loyal chorus supporting a strong centre. Their belief that they had an unwritten deal with the high command may also help to explain the Bengal contingent's otherwise inexplicable stance on matters which aroused controversy in the Assembly. 'Clause 15' of the 'model provincial constitution' gave the governors of the provinces special powers in an emergency. Moved by Sardar Patel, this clause was supported, in what had quickly become standard practice, by a 'strengthening' clause tabled by K. M. Munshi.[34] Uncharacteristically, an otherwise complaisant Assembly hotly debated this clause.[35] In July 1947, Pandit Kunzru from the United Provinces mounted a strongly worded attack on Clause 15.[36] He likened it to the notorious Section 93 of the Government of India Act of 1935, which gave governors appointed by the viceroy the power to dismiss elected Indian ministries.[37] Even Govind Ballabh Pant, premier of the United Provinces, opposed the amendment in open defiance of the three-line whip of the high command.[38]

Yet the Bengalis saw another chance of showing the centre that it could rely on them even when the going got tough, and rose to defend a clause which undermined the autonomy of every province, Bengal included. Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra, the most voluble member of the Bengali

[33] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 189.

[34] The notorious Clause 15 of the 'Report on the Principles of a model Provincial Constitution' gave the governor of a province (nominated by the centre) the responsibility to prevent 'any grave menace to the peace and tranquillity of the Province'. In discharging this responsibility, the governor was empowered to 'take such action as he considers appropriate under his emergency powers'. Gubernatorial diktat was further strengthened by an amendment, put forward by K. M. Munshi, which gave the governor the right to assume, by proclamation, 'all or any of the functions of Government and all or any powers vested in or exercisable by any Provincial body or authority'. See *CAD* IV, pp. 727–9. For a discussion of the debates on the role of governors, see Ralph Herbert Retzlaff, 'The Constituent Assembly of India and the problem of Indian unity. A study of the actions taken by the Constituent Assembly of India to overcome divisive forces in Indian social and political life during the drafting of the Indian constitution', Cornell University, doctoral dissertation, 1960.

[35] Even though the plans about the role of the governors went through many changes in the course of the Assembly debates, it continues to this day to be one of the most controversial features of India's constitution. Many commentators regarded the clause as having undermined states' rights by allowing the centre to suspend provisions designed to protect such little autonomy as the provincial governments had from the overweening unitary powers of the centre.

[36] An old-fashioned Liberal in the Sapru mould, Kunzru was a Kashmiri Pandit from the United Provinces.

[37] *CAD* IV, p. 798. [38] *Ibid.*, pp. 809–11.

rump in the Assembly, spoke up for the clause and for the amendment. Significantly, he did so on 23 July 1947, the very day on which the Bengali contingent submitted its concordat to the high command. Maitra marshalled arguments for the clause from Bengal's particular perspective: 'coming from an unfortunate part of this country where the breakdown of the machinery of law and order and the non-intervention of the administrative head in the matter has been causing tremendous bloodshed and incalculable suffering and hardship, I feel called upon to put in a few words in support'. Section 93, he argued, contained 'certain very valuable provisions. Our only grievance is that the provisions of Section 93 have more often than not been abused and not properly used.'[39]

A month later, the good Pandit rose again to defend the indefensible – on this occasion, a clause by which the centre arrogated to itself the power to lock up anyone anywhere in the country without trial 'for reasons of State'. As the vociferous and wholly justified protests of many members of the Assembly made clear, this clause was simply the notorious Regulation III of 1818, by which the Raj had given itself powers to detain anyone it deemed to be an enemy of the state without trial, in another guise.[40] But Bengal's self-appointed apologists for the centre assured the many critics of this clause that their fears were baseless, given the dawn of a new age in which 'we are going to start off a new State of our own'. The argument was that, 'for the interests of the State itself', the 'union Government must be armed with certain powers'. Once again, this would-be Kautilya hinted that West Bengal's predicament had persuaded him that for *raisons d'état* civil liberties might have to be sacrificed. To make the point, Maitra painted a sombre picture in which new India, embattled but unbowed, needed these special powers to protect itself from its many enemies, external and internal:

> If, for instance, in any part of the federation . . . some persons were found by the Government, on reliable information, out to create mischief that would not only be detrimental to the best interests of the Dominion, but to peace, do you think the Government should sit quiet and not move in the matter, simply because there has been no overt act on their behalf which would bring them under the clutches of the law? There may be fifth columnists who may be secretly working in the Dominion itself . . . they may be in the pay of a foreign Government; they may even be in the pay of a rival Government . . . Therefore, in the present set up of things, when we have within the geographical borders another independent State, it is all the more necessary that such a power should be provided in the constitution . . . Therefore, it is not a question of civil liberties being in danger; it is a question of high reasons of State, and reasons of State should take precedence over everything.[41]

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 804. [40] *CAD* V–VI, p. 121.
[41] Debate on the Report of the Union Powers Committee, 22 August 1947, *ibid.*, p. 122.

Maitra's allusions to happenings in Hyderabad and his scare-mongering about foreign powers, fifth columnists and other unspecified spectres which threatened the state were intended to drum up support for the clause. But his speech also revealed the anxieties and prejudices of Bengal's new rulers, who feared communist militancy inside their own state and were jumpy about the many Muslims who remained in West Bengal, fearing that these were Trojan horses, the agents of a rival dominion across its new borders. The vociferous support of Bengal's representatives for two extremely contentious measures, both of which gave the centre draconian powers over the provinces and compromised the fundamental rights of their citizens, is telling. Bengal's new leaders were uncertain about their ability, once in office, effectively to control their own backyards. These fears had profoundly influenced the borders they had devised for their new state. Once they knew they would get a state of their own, devising ways of hanging on to power in it was their overriding concern, and they were ready to hand over to new India's centre an overweening authority in the expectation that it would help them redress the political balance in the divided remnants of old Bengal.

India's new fiscal system and West Bengal

The strategy of the delegates from West Bengal was posited on the assumption that the centre, come what may, would prop up its loyal clients. This was also suggested by their reactions to proposals about taxation and finance. The power to raise their own monies lay at the heart of the autonomy the provinces strove to win for themselves. In July 1947, the report of the Union Powers Committee, which Nehru put to the Assembly, showed that India's leaders intended to let the provinces have very little control over their resources.[42] The report blandly proposed that independent India should continue with the system enshrined in the Government of India Act of 1935, which shared the power to levy and collect taxes over separate 'heads' between the centre and provinces in quite unequal proportions, with the centre hanging on to much and letting the provinces have little. The Union Powers Committee's report, following the 1935 act, proposed that the provinces be given only the most inelastic and unfructuous sources of revenue, for example, land revenue, taxes on agriculture, sales tax and stamp duties.[43] By contrast,

[42] Appendix 'A', No. CA/23/Com/47, Report of the Union Powers Committee (5 July 1947), *ibid.*, pp. 60–70.

[43] In addition to land revenue, the full states' list included liquor and opium excise, stamps, agricultural income tax, sales and purchase taxes, taxes on land and buildings, terminal

the centre would keep for itself all those sources of revenue which were likely to grow and would bring in the most returns, in other words export and excise duties, income tax and corporation tax.[44] The provinces were to be left with thin pickings from the stagnant sectors of the economy, while the central exchequer appropriated most of the revenue from dynamic sectors.

Such a division of spoils did not leave provinces with sufficient resources to pay for doing the job the constitution expected them to do, and many provincial spokesmen protested at a deal which left them having to make do with whatever little the centre was prepared to dole out. As K. Santhanam, a leading newspaperman from the south,[45] pointed out, 'the provinces [would] be beggars at the doors of the centre', forced to seek 'doles' from it in order to provide the most basic services to their people.[46] Speaking on behalf of the princely state of Mysore of which he was dewan, Sir A. Ramaswamy Mudaliar, in a measured and magisterial analysis of the proposals, showed how their interests had been ignored. The proposed share-out of revenue firmly pinned upon the provinces the responsibility for providing for 'the happiness of the individual man', but they were not being given 'enough resources to satisfy those responsibilities'.[47]

Once again, it was a member from West Bengal who produced the familiar routine ridiculing the complaints of those speaking up for provincial interests. On this occasion, it was Debi Prasad Khaitan, in his time something of a fixer behind the scenes in Bengal politics,[48] who

taxes on passengers and goods, taxes on the consumption and sale of electricity, taxes on vehicles, animals and boats, amusements, betting and gambling, professions, trades and callings: K. Santhanam, *Union–state relations in India*, New Delhi, 1960, p. 31.

44 Some of the taxes collected by the centre were intended exclusively for the use of the central government, including export duties and corporation tax. However, the proceeds of other taxes collected by the centre, crucially income tax, were to be shared among the provinces, but the basis for distribution was not specified. In effect, the Union Powers Committee proposed to give the provinces an entitlement to an unspecified share of income tax and a slice of excise duties, in addition to whatever they were able to collect under their own heads, but the centre would decide who got what: Report of the Union Powers Committee, Appendix 'A', No. CA/23/Com. 47, *CAD* V–VI, pp. 62–70. See also Santhanam, *Union–state relations*, pp. 30–3; Austin, *The Indian constitution*, pp. 218–19.

45 Santhanam was then joint editor of the *Hindustan Times*.

46 *CAD* V–VI, p. 57. 47 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

48 Khaitan ws a prominent Marwari capitalist, sometime president of the Federation of India Chambers of Commerce and of the Bengal Millowners Association, who had made his money speculating on jute futures and later out of cotton. He had raised money for Subhas Bose and the Congress in the 1930s, but had hedged his bets by giving the Mahasabha funds in the 1940s. He became an important figure in the Constituent Assembly's two critically important drafting and advisory committees, but died before the constitution came into effect. See Omkar Goswami, 'Sahibs, babus and banias. Changes in industrial control in eastern India, 1918–1956', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 48, 2 (May 1989), pp. 289–309; and Memo dated 3 December 1939, GB SB 'PH Series', File No. 501/39 (III).

robustly challenged Mudaliar's proposition. As a member of the powerful Drafting Committee, Khaitan had pressed for even more heads of tax to be given to the centre than the report of the Union Powers Committee proposed.[49] He now argued that the revenues assigned to the centre were taxes which, realistically speaking, only the centre could levy and collect. It was, he insisted, 'in the interests of our country as also in the interests of the provinces and also of every individual which the population of the provinces is composed of, that the Central Government ... should be strong and that we should not in any way weaken the Centre on theoretical arguments'. Only a strong centre could 'develop the total wealth of the country at large'. So he appealed to the Constituent Assembly to 'not be carried away by this slogan of Centre versus Provinces',[50] and to lend support to the builders of a strong centre.

The line taken by the West Bengal delegation was that provinces had nothing to fear by signing away to the centre the right to collect India's most lucrative taxes. This was an act of faith, particularly since these arrangements were likely to have profound consequences for their own province. The Union Powers Committee's disposition of the taxes between centre and province affected all provinces, but some aspects impinged upon some provinces more than others. Relatively rich provinces felt its impact in different ways from the poor. Those provinces which depended particularly on land revenue felt the effect differently from those which produced raw materials or those with a significant industrial and commercial capacity. Provinces in which the people paid large amounts of income tax and consumed more goods did well or badly in ways different from those which were sleepy hollows of underdevelopment. Provincial leaders in the Assembly, alive to the particular implications of the proposed fiscal arrangements for their own states, fought hard to get a deal which would suit their local interests best. For example, Bombay, a wealthy part of India, wanted a substantial cut of the revenues from the income and corporation taxes, as its taxpayers paid the largest proportion in India of these heads of taxation. West Bengal's three neighbours – Assam, Bihar and Orissa – energetically tried to influence

[49] On 30 June 1947, when the Union Powers Committee met to consider the situation 'in the light of the changed political situation' after 3 June, Khaitan submitted a note on 'Subjects to be added to Union Powers'. He listed sixteen subjects: interprovincial irrigation; fisheries; marriage and divorce; wills, intestacy and succession; transfer and registration of property; contracts; bankruptcy and insolvency; jurisdiction and power of all courts; legal, medical and other professions; criminal law and criminal procedure; civil procedure; newspapers, books and printing; vehicles; the prevention of contagious disease; sanctioning or censorship of cinematographic films; and fees in respect of all these matters. See Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1-U/47.

[50] *CAD* V–VI, pp. 97–9.

the Assembly to distribute revenues in ways which would bring their provinces particular benefits. Speaking for Assam, which produced such oil as India had, Gopinath Bardoloi proposed an amendment to the draft constitution which called for three-quarters of the excise duties on petroleum and kerosene to be retained by the producing state and 'not form a part of the revenue of India'. Assam, like Bengal, grew tea and jute, and so Bardoloi demanded that two-thirds of the export duties on these two primary commodities should be given to the states which grew them.[51] Without exception, poor provinces asked for a system of federal finance which, as Pandit Kunzru succinctly put it, would benefit them by ensuring 'the transfer of wealth from the richer to the poorer provinces'.[52]

In this complex wrestling for advantage between centre and province, West Bengal, in common with other states, had much to gain and much to lose. If the centre kept for itself the power to levy and collect the most lucrative taxes and distributed the proceeds according to its perception of provincial need, in effect it would be able to tax the richer provinces to subsidise the poorer. Even after the losses which partition entailed, for the time being West Bengal was still one of the richest provinces in India, as measured by the per capita income of its people. Bombay and West Bengal together paid three-quarters of the total of India's income tax, although these two provinces had less than a fifth of India's population. By itself, West Bengal paid three rupees out of every ten of all the income tax collected in India. Bombay and West Bengal, as two of the main centres of industry and business, stood to lose if provinces were given no share of the corporation taxes. Since West Bengal and Bombay between them housed the headquarters of most of India's biggest industrial and commercial enterprises, a corporation tax engrossed by the centre would in effect be a levy upon these two provinces. West Bengal and Bombay were also the largest consumers of goods on which sales taxes and excise duties were levied, and arguably had a claim to some part of the proceeds of these duties. If excise duties went in their entirety to the centre, this too would represent a 'loss', with the centre playing Robin Hood, taking from the rich provinces and giving to the poor.

As one of the two best-off provinces in India, West Bengal shared with Bombay many interests. But it also had interests in common with its poorer cousins in the east, Bihar, Assam and Orissa. West Bengal would be as affected as its poorer neighbours by decisions about export duties, since it too produced the same export commodities, jute and tea.

[51] 'Amendments to the Draft Constitution of India', Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 5-A/48, Col. No. 1.
[52] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 222.

Like Bihar and Assam, Bengal was rich in minerals and would equally be affected by central controls over their production and distribution. The Union Powers Committee's ruling that land revenue would remain the main source of income for the provinces had particular implications for West Bengal and for neighbouring Orissa and Bihar. In all these three provinces, the Permanent Settlement of 1793 had meant that land revenue was by now a small and continually shrinking asset. For West Bengal, the problem of returns from the land was made worse by partition, since at a stroke the new province lost two-thirds of the land which paid such exiguous revenues as the Settlement produced. In fact, the territory that went to East Bengal paid only 40 per cent of the total land revenue of the undivided province. But since these eastern lands were relatively lightly taxed, they had a greater potential for yielding more revenue in the future than the heavily taxed tracts which went to West Bengal. This was another blow to any prospect of the government of West Bengal being able to raise adequate revenues of its own.[53] The Permanent Settlement had fixed the land revenue paid by Bengal's landowners in perpetuity, so its real value was in constant decline.[54] By 1939, land revenue accounted for only a quarter of undivided Bengal's total revenues.[55] Even if the Permanent Settlement were abolished and new arrangements made to squeeze more out of the countryside, West Bengal could not rely too heavily on returns from the land since the new province had proportionately fewer tillers of the soil than any other state in independent India. Already by 1951, 42.8 per cent of West Bengal's people were dependent on non-agricultural livelihoods, the highest of any state in India.[56] By ruling that the provinces were to keep all the agricultural taxes, the Union Powers Committee did West Bengal no favours. West Bengal had the worst prospects of any state in India of raising resources by taxing land and agriculture, particularly now that agriculturists, still the vast majority of the population, were about to have the vote. These complex equations might well have persuaded the representatives of West Bengal in the Assembly of the merits of making common cause with other provinces against the centre's rulings, whether with Bombay

[53] S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 65.

[54] By 1922, Bengal's revenues from provincial heads totalled just Rs 8 crores, of which Rs 3 crores or over a third came from the tax on land. In comparison, Bombay raised Rs 13 crores and Madras Rs 11 crores from provincial heads: Thomas, *Federal finance*, Appendix F, pp. 517–19. See also Ranajit Roy, *The agony of West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1973, p. 36.

[55] Contrast Madras, which by 1939 was able to raise between Rs 5 and 6 crores a year from the land, about a third of its total revenues: Thomas, *Federal finance*, Appendix F, pp. 517–19.

[56] *Census of India 1951*, vol. VI, part I A (henceforth *1951 Census*), p. 134.

or with the states carved out of Greater Bengal and Upper India. But they chose instead to stick with the centre and toe the Union Powers Committee's line.

In September 1947, taken aback by the vehemence of the provincial reaction to the proposals of the Union Powers Committee, the high command set up a three-member Expert Committee to report on the financial provisions of the constitution.[57] West Bengal's evidence before the Expert Committee gives a hint of why the state government decided not to challenge the recommendations of the Union Powers Committee. Asked by the Expert Committee for their views on how taxes ought to be shared out between the provinces, every provincial government produced detailed proposals. When West Bengal's wish-list is compared with those of other provinces, some interesting conclusions emerge.

Bihar's detailed memorandum strongly criticised the draft constitution for giving the provinces only inelastic sources of revenue. Bihar was a poor province with a large population. Its land revenue system came under the Permanent Settlement, and such sources of wealth as it had were its mineral reserves. Under the proposed disposition of taxes, the centre's arrogation of minerals such as coal, iron and steel threatened to deprive Bihar of the benefits of its own minerals. Bihar also grew jute, so it had reason to join Assam in demanding that the jute-growing states should get their cut of the export duties levied on jute.[58] Bihar wanted Article 224 to be amended so that these concessions would be written into the constitution as statutory provisions. The state had some heavy industry, so it did not like the Union Powers Committee's proposal that the centre rather than the provinces had the power to tax industrial undertakings.[59] And finally, and perhaps most ominously for West Bengal, Bihar, as a populous but poor province, argued that the constitution should take account of a state's population in sharing out the proceeds of income tax.[60]

Orissa, a small and backward state, put up a robust case for improving its share of fiscal resources. Just as Bihar and Assam, Orissa grew jute, so it wanted to claw back some of the export duties levied on that commodity. Orissa's land revenue too had been permanently settled, so it also suffered from the law of diminishing returns. But the most formidable

[57] Debi Prasad Khaitan to Rajendra Prasad, 23 September 1947, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1(2)-D/47.
[58] Government of Bihar, Finance Department, memorandum dated 20 May 1948, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 5-A/48, Col. No. 1.
[59] Memorandum dated 20 May 1948, by the Government of Bihar on the Draft Constitution, *ibid.*
[60] Memorandum by S. K. Sinha, Prime Minister of Bihar, dated 31 October 1947, *ibid.*

complaint that the Oriya's David slung at India's Goliath was against the Niemeyer formula by which the proceeds of income tax had previously been shared.[61] This formula, as the Oriya representatives showed, did nothing for states which were poor. Orissa persuasively argued that India's new constitution should give 'due weightage to those provinces which are still undeveloped', and that the criterion 'for judging the state of development of a particular province [should] be by its revenue in relation to its population'.[62]

For its part, Bombay, in an unashamed dash for cash, bid for a big share of the 'wealth' taxes. Its government wanted the centre to return three-quarters of all revenues from income tax to the provinces, and, of this sum, Bombay demanded a third. It laid similar claims to the revenues from corporation tax. It also insisted that excise and export duties be given in their entirety to the provinces which collected them, an arrangement by which Bombay and West Bengal, through whose ports India exported most of its goods and whose populations consumed many taxable commodities, would have done spectacularly well.

The government of the East Punjab asked for favoured treatment on the grounds that partition had hit its economy hard. Writing to the Drafting Committee, the East Punjab insisted that it

> be fully appreciated that after partition, the East Punjab Province is likely to face a revenue deficit of about three crores per annum ... A full measure of correction has therefore to be applied in favour of the East Punjab and it is essential that our share of the proceeds of taxes on income should be very appreciably raised.

[61] In January 1936, in the run-up to the concession of provincial autonomy under the 1935 Government of India Act, Sir Otto Niemeyer had been given the job of assessing the finances of the provinces: how much money they needed and how their share of the income tax should be settled. Niemeyer produced an algorithm which took into account where those who paid income tax lived and the provinces' total populations. According to his formula, the provinces received a percentage of the tax as follows: Bengal, 20; Bombay, 20; Madras, 15; United Provinces, 15; the Punjab, 8; Bihar, 10; Central Provinces, 5; Assam, 2; North-West Frontier Province, 1; Orissa, 2; and Sind, 2. See Thomas, *Federal finance*, pp. 416–19. According to H. K. Mahtab, Prime Minister of Orissa, the Niemeyer formula was unsatisfactory because it took no account of 'the state of development of different provinces': 'Memorandum on the distribution of resources between the Centre and the Provinces', H. K. Mahtab, dated 27 September 1947, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1(2)-D/47.

[62] Painting a grim picture of Orissa's 'starvation' when it had been ruled by Bengal, Premier Mahtab described the parlous condition of the hill tribes, the abysmal provisions for public health, the lack of schools and Orissa's poor systems of road and rail, not to mention the perennial flooding of its coastal districts and the appalling poverty of its people. For all these reasons, he demanded a greater share of India's resources for his unfortunate province: *ibid.*

Moreover, the truncated land of the five rivers had lost substantial income from 'extraordinary receipts' and from 'crown waste lands'. The richest tracts in the Punjab were the canal colonies, and these had gone to Pakistan. With Lahore also lost to Pakistan, the East Punjab needed a new capital, which would have to be built from scratch at great cost. These were some of the reasons why the East Punjab argued that it was entitled to a disproportionate share of grants-in-aid from the centre.[63]

Some of these arguments by the various states, and the special pleading upon which they depended, carried more weight than others in the Constituent Assembly.[64] But the fact is that most of the provinces fought for their patch, notwithstanding the general bias in the Assembly in favour of a strong centre and despite the control which the high command strove to maintain over its provincial satraps. When push came to shove, the provinces did not stand back in this scramble for resources. Yet West Bengal, which had obediently fallen in behind the centre whenever there were signs of any provincial rebellion on the floor of the Assembly, now made only the most modest requests to the Expert Committee. Significantly, West Bengal kept quiet about the Permanent Settlement, although the argument about how little juice was left in that shrivelled-up source of revenue was even stronger in Bengal than in Bihar and Orissa. West Bengal also signally failed to back the demands of Bihar and the Central Provinces that they should be allowed to benefit from their mineral wealth, despite the fact that Bengal had plenty of coal and iron of its own. It did not support Assam's claim that producing provinces should keep the lion's share of the export duties on tea. Unlike the East Punjab, West Bengal did not register its title to receive compensation for all that it had lost by partition; and West Bengal was far more restrained than Bombay in claiming a share of the 'wealth taxes' (see table 2.2).

In a highly significant move, West Bengal, alone among the provinces, demanded that a Finance Commission be set up along the lines of the Commonwealth Grants Commission in Australia.[65] In essence, Bengal

[63] Copy of a letter from the East Punjab Government to Secretary, Constituent Assembly of India, enclosed in K. V. Padmanabhan to all members of the Drafting Committee, dated 7 October 1947, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1(2)-D/47.

[64] Bihar's and Orissa's arguments that the size of a province's population and its relative backwardness influenced future allocations by the Finance Commissions. Assam's entitlements to certain grants were listed, exceptionally, in Article 275 of the constitution. East Punjab's calls for special treatment on account of partition were also heard and acted upon: B. P. R. Vithal and M. L. Sastry, *Fiscal federalism in India*, Delhi, 2001, Annexure XVII, p. 319.

[65] 'Report of the Expert Committee on the Financial Provisions of the Constitution', Appendix III, 'Summary of Provincial Suggestions', Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 1(2)-D/47.

Table 2.2. *Summary of provincial suggestions to the Expert Committee on the financial provisions of the Union Constitution*

SUBJECT	Bombay	Bihar	Central Provinces	United Provinces	Madras	Orissa	Assam	East Punjab	West Bengal
Income tax	75% to be shared among the provinces, one-third of the provincial share for Bombay	17 crores instead of 13 crores allotted; in future distribution to be governed by population and where the income is earned	75% for provinces	50% for provinces on population basis	50% of net proceeds to provinces	50% for provinces, but provincial shares should be revised to take into account development	75% to provinces, but based on a 'drastic revision' of the shares of different provinces	Its share to be appreciably increased to meet deficits arising from partition	60% to be shared among the provinces in proportion to amounts collected in particular provinces
Corporation tax	75% to be shared among the provinces; one-third of the provincial share for Bombay		Inclusion of corporation tax and taxes on assets within income tax	50% for provinces on population basis	At least 50% of net proceeds to provinces				Nil
Central excise duties (on tobacco and all other goods except alcohol)	Should be provincialised altogether, or not less than 50% to go to the provinces	A portion of the duty should go to provinces based on yields	At least 75% to provinces; new articles such as rubber goods and paper should be covered	Should be provincialised entirely and distributed on population basis	Should be provincialised entirely	A portion of the duty should go to provinces	At least 75% of excise duty on oil to Assam; at least 50% of other excise duties to provinces on formula combining factors of production, population and expenditure		25% to the provinces
Export duties on jute and jute products		Entire duties to go to jute-growing provinces							75% to provinces growing and manufacturing jute

Table 2.2. (*cont.*)

SUBJECT	Bombay	Bihar	Central Provinces	United Provinces	Madras	Orissa	Assam	East Punjab	West Bengal
Export duties (other than jute)	50% of net proceeds to the provinces		Export duties on minerals (coal and manganese) to Central Provinces	100% to the provinces and distribution on population basis		A portion to provinces	At least 75% of tea proceeds to Assam		25% of net proceeds to provinces
Succession duties, federal stamp duties, terminal taxes, taxes on freight and fares			Duties in respect of agricultural land to go to centre	100% to provinces	100% to provinces		50% of any increase to provinces		Provincial governments should be empowered to levy them 'if the Central Government does not levy them'
Non-tax proposals		A system of grants-in-aid or subventions to favour provinces with low per capita revenue	A system of central grants based on factors such as natural resources, industrial development, tax capacity	Allocations and subventions to rectify UPs' sposition; consolidated debt from UP to India should be wiped off			Allocations and subventions to rectify E. Punjab's position		Establishment of a Finance Commission on the lines of the Australian Commonwealth Grants Commission
Others			Transfer to provincial list of state lotteries and sales tax, removal of limits on taxes on trades and professions						

Source: Based on Appendix III of the 'Report of the Expert Committee on the Financial Provisions of the Constitution', *Constituent Assembly of India. Debates* (12 vols.), Lok Sabha Secretariat, Government of India, Faridabad, vol. VII (i), 1948.

wanted a centrally appointed commission of experts to control the future distribution of resources among the provinces. This powerfully suggests that West Bengal calculated it would gain from such an arrangement, believing that such an expert commission, insulated in New Delhi from the political pressures from various provinces, would have the leeway to treat Bengal well. West Bengal would do better in the future, Calcutta thought, from flexible arrangements made by friendly experts at the centre than from some permanent settlement thrashed out on the floor of the Assembly and embedded in the constitution.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that West Bengal's leaders were confident that the centre would favour their province, both at this time and in the future, since only the confident are content with flexibility in uncertain times. That this was Bengal's assumption is strongly suggested by the reaction of its spokesmen when twenty leaders from other provinces joined together to demand that the provincial share of divisible tax heads be entrenched in the constitution. K. C. Neogy from West Bengal spoke strongly against this demand, arguing that embedding the provision in the constitution was too inflexible an instrument to serve the future needs of a changing India.[66] This was a profoundly revealing intervention. It shows that Bengal's leaders, far from closing ranks with other provinces to get the fiscal relations between centre and provinces ring-fenced in the constitution, put their trust in a 'special relationship' with the centre which would reward them tomorrow for conspicuous loyalty today. This was the big gamble that West Bengal took in the making of the constitution, putting all its money on the centre and failing to hedge the bet. But it was a wager that did not pay off, as the findings of this book will show.

Warning signs

On these insecure assumptions, West Bengal's delegates signed away many powers to the centre in the Constituent Assembly. To begin with, it seemed that they had made the right decision. Towards the end of August 1947, Sardar Patel presented the report of the Committee on Minority Rights to the Assembly. The report proposed measures to reserve seats for Muslims in each province in proportion to their numbers, and to allow them to contest 'general' seats as well.[67] If these rules had been

[66] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 232.

[67] The Advisory Committee recommended that 'as a general rule . . . seats for the different recognised minorities shall be reserved in the various legislatures on the basis of their population. This reservation shall be initially for a period of ten years . . . We recommend also that the members of a minority community who have a reserved seat shall have the right to contest the unreserved seats as well': 'Report of the Advisory Committee on the

implemented in West Bengal, they would have given Muslims a fixed quota of reserved seats in the West Bengal Assembly on the basis of their population, or a fifth of the total number of seats in the House, as well as the right to compete for election – with good chances of success in the many constituencies where Muslims were numerous – from general unreserved seats. This ruling threatened to ride a proverbial coach and horses through the careful calculations that had lain behind the Bengal Congress's case for having particular boundaries, and safe percentages of Hindus, for their new province, which critically had assumed that there would be no reservations or weightages for Muslims. When West Bengal's spokesmen protested,[68] Sardar Patel quickly agreed to an amendment[69] which exempted West Bengal and the East Punjab from the new rules until the matter had been looked into, 'in view of the special situation' of the two divided provinces.[70]

West Bengal's optimism also seemed to be justified by the report, published in December 1947, of the Expert Committee on the financial provisions of the constitution. Headed by Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, the Bengali financier and a former member for commerce in the viceroy's Executive Council, the committee produced a bundle of recommendations, all of which seemed strongly to favour West Bengal. The committee proposed that export duties on jute be phased out, but recommended that, when that happened, the jute-producing states should be compensated. For a period of ten years, the jute-producing states would receive a fixed amount of compensation, and West Bengal, as the leading manufacturer of finished jute, would also be given Rs 100 million a year for ten years to make up for its losses.[71] By contrast, it proposed that Assam should get only Rs 1.5 million, Bihar Rs 1.7 million, and Orissa a mere Rs 300,000. The Expert Committee proposed an increase, from 50 to 60 per cent, of the provincial share of the income tax, and controversially it

Subject of Minority Rights', 27 August 1947, in *Constituent Assembly of India. Reports of the Committees. Second series*, Lok Sabha Secretariat, Government of India Press, Faridabad, 1948 (henceforth *Reports. Second series*), pp. 30–1.

68 Lakshmi Kanta Maitra jumped up to tell the Assembly that, 'as a result of the partition of the country and particularly after the Radcliffe Award', 'most of the members from Bengal are not in a position to understand here and now what West Bengal's population now consists of', and argued that reserving a quota of seats for Muslims while there was such uncertainty about Bengal's overall numbers would be unfair: *CAD* V–VI, pp. 279–80.

69 Debi Prasad Khaitan moved an amendment to the effect that 'owing to the special situation of West Bengal, any minority community which has reserved seats shall not have the right to contest unreserved seats': *ibid.*, p. 278.

70 This exemption was set out in paragraph 4 of the 'Appendix to the Report of the Advisory Committee on the Subject of Minority Rights', *Reports. Second series*, p. 40.

71 'Report of the Expert Committee on Financial Provisions on the Union Constitution', (5 December 1947), *Reports. Third series*, Delhi, 1950, p. 131.

recommended that the provinces should also get the lion's share of the corporation tax, as well as a sizeable share of central excise duties. Even more contentious was its recommendation that in divvying out the income and corporation taxes between the provinces, almost 60 per cent be distributed on the basis of where they had been collected, a third on the basis of the size of population and only a meagre 8 per cent 'to mitigate hardship'. This was precisely what West Bengal wanted, since so much of India's income and corporation taxes were levied in the province. The committee also lent its backing to West Bengal's suggestion that a Finance Commission be established. On the subject of grants-in-aid and subventions, it proposed raising the existing subventions to Orissa and Bihar and 'a substantial annual subvention to East Punjab for some time to come', and included West Bengal in its largesse by arguing that it too would need 'some temporary assistance' as a result of partition.[72] Altogether the Expert Committee would have given West Bengal a crore of rupees each year for ten years as compensation in lieu of jute export duties, a larger slice of the income taxes than the province had received before, and substantial new revenues from corporation taxes and excise duties, as well as some modest subventions to help with reconstruction after partition. Whether by luck or by design, Sarkar's committee had produced a package of recommendations out of which West Bengal looked set to do extremely well. Indeed, if these recommendations had been implemented, West Bengal would have come out of partition better off, in terms of revenue, than it had been before. For the time being, the 'special relationship' seemed to be going well and paying Bengal the dividends which its leaders had expected.

But the Expert Committee's recommendations were rejected long before the Constituent Assembly came to consider them. Despite the fact that its report was ready by December 1947, it was put forward in the Constituent Assembly only eleven months later, on 5 November 1948. By this time the draft constitution had already been prepared, circulated and rubber-stamped by the provincial legislatures. As some alert members of the Assembly were quick to point out, the Drafting Committee had 'illegitimately' ignored the recommendations of the Expert Committee in drawing up the financial provisions in the draft constitution.[73] When Syed Mohammad Saadulla, a key member of the Drafting

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[73] T. T. Krishnamachari, Bishwanath Das and K. Santhanam were among those who questioned the right of the Drafting Committee to ignore recommendations of expert committees appointed by the Constituent Assembly; Santhanam went so far as to attack the Drafting Committee for 'illegitimately' converting themselves into, and thereby arrogating the powers of, the Constituent Assembly: *CAD* VII(i), pp. 232–3, 262.

Committee and a former premier of Assam,[74] took the floor to defend the Drafting Committee, it became clear what had happened. The Expert Committee's recommendations had been savaged by a host of critics and shot down inside the Drafting Committee, long before they got to the Assembly. Spokesmen of the provincial have-nots inside the Drafting Committee took the experts to task for helping the richer provinces and doing so little to assist the poor. Saadulla made no bones about the fact that the Drafting Committee had been particularly swayed by complaints from representatives of poorer provinces that the Expert Committee had unfairly favoured West Bengal. His speech is extremely revealing and deserves to be quoted:

> First I take the recommendation of the Expert Committee regarding the share in the jute duty which is now available to the jute-growing provinces of India. This subject is very vital for the Republic of India. Jute, as is known, is the world monopoly of these four provinces only ... undivided Bengal used to produce 85 per cent of the world's jute, Bihar 7 per cent, Assam 6 per cent and Orissa 2 per cent but these proportions have been changed by the partition of Bengal into East and West Bengal ... the present West Bengal produces only 10 per cent or 12 per cent of world jute. This position has changed the percentages of Assam, Bihar and Orissa. Yet what do we find in the recommendations of the Financial Experts' report? Their recommendations is that the share ... of the jute export duty which was given to the four provinces should be stopped ... But they realised that the poor provinces will be hard hit and therefore recommended that for ten years, the contribution should be made by the Government of India ex-gratia and in the following proportion: West Bengal – one crore, Assam – 15 lakhs, Bihar – 17 lakhs and Orissa – 3 lakhs.
>
> Now I request this Honourable House to consider seriously whether this distribution is just or equitable for a province like Assam ... or Orissa or Bihar. Bihar has got its production ratio increased from 7 percent to very nearly 35 percent of the jute grown in India now. Similarly the percentage for Assam has gone up to 30 percent and proportionately for Orissa. Yet the Expert Committee wants to perpetuate the injustice that was done during the bureaucratic days and divide the proceeds in the same fashion, giving West Bengal which produces only 10 or 12 percent of the total jute production as much as one crore ... West Bengal cannot increase its acreage. There all the available waste lands are being requisitioned for refugees from East Pakistan ... If tomorrow the provinces of Assam and

[74] Saadulla, a former advocate at the Calcutta High Court, was a one-time 'Nationalist', or Congress-minded, Muslim, who later joined the Muslim League. He was a member of the Assam Legislative Council from 1912 to 1920, minister of education and agriculture in Assam from 1924 to 1929 and the minister of finance and law from 1930 to 1934. He was knighted in 1928 and made KCIE in 1946. He was given a place on the powerful Drafting Committee because of his distinction and administrative experience. Its other members were Ambedkar, N. G. Ayyangar, A. K. Ayyar, K. M. Munshi, N. Madhava Rau, B. L. Mitter and Debi Prasad Khaitan (after Khaitan's death in 1948, he was replaced by T. T. Krishnamachari).

Orissa cease to produce jute, the jute mills in Bengal would not have anything to do and they will have to close down. It is on this account that the Drafting Committee thought that we should not accept those recommendations of the Expert Committee.

Saadulla's speech makes it quite clear that spokesmen of West Bengal's three poorer neighbours had lined up inside the Drafting Committee to demand that it should not be given such disproportionate compensation for its losses on account of jute. It was also crystal clear that in their concerted attack on Bengal, the gang of three, Assam, Bihar and Orissa, had played extremely hard ball. Saadulla reminded the Assembly that West Bengal was no longer a major jute-growing state; partition had stripped it of the tracts where most of its jute was grown. Nor was it likely that West Bengal could bring new land under cultivation for jute since all the land it had, and more, would now be needed to grow food for a population swelled by many millions of hungry refugees. So Bengal was no longer entitled to a lion's share of compensation on account of jute. Saadulla and his Bihari and Oriya allies on the Drafting Committee saw the logic of the partition that Bengal had demanded and did not hide their collective *Schadenfreude* at having this opportunity to settle old scores.

Turning to the Expert Committee's recommendations on Income and Corporation Tax, Saadulla was equally frank:

Sir, most Honourable Members here do not know how unjustly and iniquitously this provision of division of income-tax has fallen on the poor provinces of Bihar and Assam. Bihar produces the raw material; Bihar has the gigantic steel works and offices, but their head offices are all in Bombay and hence the income-tax is paid in Bombay. Bihar therefore does not get any credit for this income tax . . . In Assam, the condition is worse. Before Partition, Assam had some 1,200 tea gardens. Even after the removal of a large part of Sylhet to Pakistan, Assam has got a thousand gardens. That is the only organised industry of Assam. But out of those 1,000 tea estates, the head offices or the offices of managing agents of as many as 800 are in Calcutta or London . . . Now do you think, Sir, if we accept this provision of the Finance Committee, justice would be meted out to Bihar and to Assam? . . . Ours has been a cry in the wilderness; our voices are never heard at the centre . . . Therefore, the Drafting Committee thought that it is not in the interests of the poorer provinces to accept the recommendation of the Expert Committee.[75]

These arguments persuaded many members of the Assembly, and in particular the Congress high command. Kunzru from the United Provinces threw his considerable weight behind them, arguing that 'the

[75] *CAD* VII(i), pp. 391–3. Saadulla went on to savage the committee's recommendations on the distribution of excise duties as well, with equally telling effect.

concept of national solidarity implies that the richer provinces should part with a portion of what ... may be due them for the benefit of poorer provinces'. A chorus of support followed from those who spoke for that great swathe of north Indian provinces which were poor and heavily populated. S. K. Sinha of Bihar echoed Kunzru when he reiterated that it was 'the duty of the Centre to give greater assistance to the poorer provinces' and to try to raise them to the level of the richer.[76] In the end, the critics of the Expert Committee won the day. Summing up the debate, Rajendra Prasad accepted the force of 'the considerable feelings' the Expert Committee's proposals had aroused, and pointedly and publicly instructed the finance minister to bear these criticisms in mind 'so that it may not be said that the policy of the Government of India is such as to give more to those who have much and to take away the little from those who have little'.[77] In consequence, most of the Expert Committee's proposals, which would have given West Bengal a favoured fiscal hand, were quietly buried. Only one of its proposals survived in the final draft of the constitution. This was the establishment of a Finance Commission, which from West Bengal's point of view proved to be a double-edged sword.

The fate of the Expert Committee's recommendations was an ominous sign of things to come. In setting up the committee in September 1947, Rajendra Prasad deliberately had not given any powerful provincial politician a seat in it,[78] so as to 'keep the issue out of politics', and had instead appointed to the committee able and experienced administrators.[79] But long before the committee's report belatedly reached the Assembly in November 1948, it was patently obvious that politics could not be 'kept out of the issue'. On the floor of the Assembly, administrative and fiscal expertise was easily trumped by populist posturings and pressures from politicians from the provinces who had the backing of Demos.

This was the moment of truth when Bengal's delegates got their first inkling that their strategy might be flawed. Their misgivings were confirmed when, just a fortnight after the ill-humoured spat about the Expert Committee's recommendations, the Minorities Sub-Committee revisited

[76] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 222. [77] *Ibid.*, p. 224.

[78] Nalini Ranjan Sarkar had been influential from behind the scenes in Bengal politics since the 1920s; he was a member of the so-called Big Five, a caucus of wealthy and well-connected persons who had great influence in provincial affairs. But he was appointed to the Expert Committee on account of his administrative experience and his knowledge of finance – he was finance minister in Fazlul Huq's ministry. The other two members of the committee, V. S. Sundaram and M. V. Rangachari, were senior civil servants, the latter in the Ministry of Finance.

[79] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 227.

the question of a special deal for West Bengal and the East Punjab in the matter of reservations for Muslims. A high-powered sub-committee consisting of Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and Ambedkar, set up in February 1948 to examine this question, reported on 23 November 1948 that it 'did not think there [were] any reasons why the arrangements approved by the Assembly for other Provinces should not be applied to West Bengal'.[80] Here again was a worrying sign that the high command was no longer minded to do any special favours for its clients in Bengal. Bengali members responded swiftly to this blow with the demand that in that case reservations for Muslims should be dropped altogether, in every province of India. In the event and by good chance, the prevailing mood after Gandhi's murder had turned opinion against having special and separate provisions and safeguards for communities. This helped West Bengal to rally support for this demand both in the Assembly[81] and inside the Minorities Sub-Committee. On 11 May 1949, the sub-committee unanimously backed H. C. Mookerjee's resolution that 'conditions having vastly changed' since 1947, 'there should be no reservation of seats in the legislature for any community in India'.[82] West Bengal's politicians may have permitted themselves a sigh of relief at this denouement, but the implications of the high command's unequivocal rejection of any special treatment for West Bengal did not bode well for the future: Bengal's 'special relationship' with the centre was beginning to look rather unsafe.

Ironically, one reason for this was partition itself. As already noted, partition had drastically cut down Bengal's representation in the Constituent Assembly. With the radical cuts in its share of seats, Bengal had been reduced from being the most powerful voice into a minority shareholder among the three presidencies, whose combined representation as a result dropped from 130 to only 86. The United Provinces, and not Bengal, was now the province with the largest representation in the Assembly. By itself the United Provinces had 55 votes, three times the number that partitioned Bengal possessed. The poorer provinces of north India – Bihar, the Central Provinces, the United Provinces and Orissa, together with Assam – could muster 125 votes in the Assembly, almost 40 more than the presidencies were left with. Partition had changed the balance in the Assembly, leaving the more developed

[80] 'Report of the Special Sub-Committee referred to in Paragraph 4 of the Advisory Committee's Report', *Reports. Third series*, p. 243.
[81] Lakshmi Kanta Maitra's declaration that 'reservation of seats today has absolutely no meaning' was met with cheers in the Assembly: *CAD* VII(i), p. 248.
[82] 'Report of the Advisory Committee on the Subject of Certain Political Safeguards for Minorities', 11 May 1949, *Reports. Third series*, p. 241.

maritime presidencies outnumbered and outgunned by the up-countrymen of north India.

The debate on the Expert Committee's proposals gave the first ominous hints of the seismic impact this would have on the balance of power within India. Democracy, with full adult franchise, would tilt the balance even further in favour of the politics of numbers and deference (or at least the pretence of deference) towards the demands of the have-nots. In this new dispensation, the old political classes of the maritime presidencies found their former influence over all-India politics significantly reduced. These changes had particularly severe implications for Bengal, since partition had reduced the state overnight from being India's biggest province to being its smallest. The imbroglio over the Expert Committee showed how this would undermine Bengal's influence in Delhi. It signalled that Bengal's role as a powerhouse of administrative expertise was no longer enough to sustain that influence; its clever and highly educated babus would be unable, the omens had begun to suggest, to prevail over their less urbane fellows from up-country. Putting their future well-being in the hands of an 'expert' Finance Commission now seemed a less secure strategy for Bengal than its representatives in the Assembly had expected.

Slowly and reluctantly, the West Bengal contingent in the Constituent Assembly were forced first to recognise, and then to react to, these unwelcome trends. In December 1948, Ambedkar, the minister for law, moved an amendment to Article 44 which laid down the rules by which the president of India was to be elected. The debates on this matter were convoluted, but an important principle hinged on their outcome. The front bench wanted to change the electoral college for the president from one which gave each member of the lower house an equal voice to one which took into account the size of the population the member represented, in order to give provinces with the largest population the biggest say in the election of the nation's president.[83] Obviously, a voting college built on numbers would cut down West Bengal's influence in elections of the president, as its representatives now realised. In a rearguard action, Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra tried to muddy the waters; he demanded a new census of West Bengal on the grounds that the 1941 census was flawed and had underestimated the size of its Hindu population. In the 1940s, he argued, the number of Hindus in western Bengal had grown by leaps and bounds. Calcutta and its environs had been flooded by people driven there by war, by famine and, above all, by partition:

> The figures of the 1941 census [were even then] in no way an index to the real population of these provinces [undivided Bengal, the undivided Punjab and

[83] *CAD* VII(ii), p. 1002.

Assam]. Now, after 15 August 1947 . . . these provinces were divided [and] . . . the course of events compelled us to change the scale of representation for East Punjab and West Bengal in the present Constituent Assembly . . . So far as Bengal is concerned, lakhs of people have already come over to West Bengal from East Bengal. You might differ about the figures. Some may put it at twenty lakhs, some may put it at thirty lakhs . . . and the number is increasing day by day because the exodus still continues. The influx of people from East Pakistan began in 1941 [when the Japanese entered the war against Great Britain] . . . Then came the disastrous Bengal famine of 1943 and again very large numbers of people moved from Eastern Pakistan to Calcutta . . . I therefore ask the Chairman of the Drafting Committee to take this fact carefully into consideration . . . Sir, the net result would be that if West Bengal is to be allocated seats on the principle of uniformity based on the population figures of the 1941 census as envisaged in this article, it will occasion grave injustice to the province which will be hopelessly under-represented in the legislatures both Central and provincial.[84]

Belatedly, the men who spoke for Bengal were coming to recognise that numbers now mattered quite as much on the all-India stage as in their parochial politics. Cutting and Sanforising the demographic fabric of Bengal may have been convenient for the Hindu elites in their domestic politics, but it took away much of the status and influence which Bengal's size had earned it in Delhi in the past. Maitra implied that West Bengal was 'gravely' under-represented in the Constituent Assembly, its reduced allocation of seats being based on the faulty enumeration of the 1941 census. When West Bengal's quota in the Assembly had been cut in July 1947, it will be recalled, not one of its spokesmen had challenged Rajendra Prasad's ruling. Yet now, a year and a half later, for the first time a Bengali raised the issue of the size of the province's representation in the Assembly, a sign that the alarm bells had at last been heard by Bengal's representatives.

In the last year of the Constituent Assembly, another issue gave West Bengal cause for concern. On 4 November 1948, a chance remark by Rajendra Prasad about the language in which the constitution should be ratified unleashed the most bitter debates in the history of the Assembly. When Prasad asked the Assembly to consider whether the constitution – now almost ready for the statute book – should be adopted in English, Hindi or Urdu, a tidal wave of tension, which had been building up under the deceptively calm surface of Indian politics, crashed down on an unprepared high command. Suresh Chandra Majumdar from Bengal jumped up to demand that the constitution be translated not only into Hindi and Urdu but also into 'the other major languages of India'. This

[84] *Ibid.*, pp. 1010–11.

prompted a harsh rebuke from Algu Rai Shastri of the United Provinces, a long-time champion of Hindi:

> Fortunately or unfortunately our brethren who live in those coastal regions where the English landed for the first time have acquired considerable proficiency in English. It is they who feel the greatest embarrassment when Hindi is mentioned as the national language.[85]

This amounted to an open declaration of war by the north Indian heartland against the maritime presidencies. Of course, the once unquestioned dominance which the presidencies had over the rest of India had step by step come to be challenged. Decades before, a milestone in the progressive undermining of the presidencies by the hinterland had been Gandhi's 1934 Congress constitution. Under that constitution, a number of new 'linguistic' provinces had been created – some of them carved out of the old presidencies – and the size of a province's population, not the number of Congress members it contained, determined its representation on the All-India Congress Committee.[86] Another sign of things to come had been the populist campaigns of the Congress under Gandhi, whether non-cooperation, civil disobedience or the Quit India movement, which gave a new prominence in all-India politics to the Hindi-speaking regions of the United Provinces, Bihar and the Central Provinces.[87] In 1923 at Cocanada, the Congress had adopted Hindustani[88] as the vernacular in which its proceedings would be conducted, and in 1928 the Nehru Report had endorsed the 'opinion that every effort should be made to make Hindustani the common language of the whole of India'.[89] In 1934, the new Congress constitution adopted Hindustani, written in either the Devanagari or the Arabic script, as Congress's official language. Once

[85] *CAD* VII (i), pp. 22–4.

[86] The 1934 Congress constitution fixed the total number of delegates to the AICC at 2000. By its rules, new linguistic provinces of 'Bengal and the Surma Valley' were allotted 324 delegates, 'Bombay City' 21, 'Maharashtra' 98, 'Tamil Nadu' 141, 'Andhra' 144 and 'Karnataka' 104. The remaining 1,128 seats were shared between the other so-called Congress provinces: A. M. Zaidi and S. G. Zaidi (eds.), *The encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress* (28 vols.), Vol. X, *1930–1935*, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 430–43, 463.

[87] The first fourteen-member Working Committee, nominated under the new rules by Congress president Rajendra Prasad in October 1934, included only one Bengali, Mrs Sarojini Naidu, and she was hardly a heavyweight in the Bengal Congress: *ibid.*, p. 411.

[88] Hindustani was the *lingua franca* of much of north India, both Hindu and Muslim, and like its close relation Urdu contained many words of Persian and Arabic origin, and was written in both the Arabic and Devanagari scripts. In contrast, Hindi was written only in the Devanagari script; it had far fewer Arabic and Persian words, having incorporated many words and neologisms directly from Sanskrit, and was regarded, particularly by Hindu revivalists, as the language of north India's Hindus, and by rights the 'national' language of free India.

[89] Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 271.

independence was achieved, many politicians from the north Indian belt wanted their influence to be reflected by Hindi – their version of India's *lingua franca*, stripped of its Urdu 'excrescences' – being made the national language of India. They now pressed the Constituent Assembly to ratify this demand.

The drive for Hindi to become India's national language had something to do with the desire to give India a measure of cultural unity; the movement also had the less attractive purpose of cutting out the speaking of Urdu and hence allegedly 'Muslim' culture from its pre-eminence in north India. But, as Shastri's speech plainly shows, the campaign for Hindi was also part and parcel of the campaign of Hindi-speaking politicians to attack what they regarded as the 'corrupt' and 'compromised' comprador groups from the presidencies, whose superior command of English and entrenched positions in the higher echelons of administration and officialdom had enabled the tidewater for so long to lord it over the north Indian hinterland. While Nehru personally was opposed to the 'Hindi-wallahs', as they were colloquially known, they had overt support from many members of the Congress Assembly party and powerful backing, whether open or tacit, inside the Congress Working Committee. Rajendra Prasad himself is known to have had some sympathy for their cause.

By throwing down this challenge, Algu Rai Shastri forced the members from the old maritime presidencies to fight their corner. For the rest of 1949, the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly were dominated by the language issue. These ill-tempered debates on language were to have huge significance for politics in India;[90] here their implications for West Bengal should be noted. Bengal had welcomed the English language and English education before the rest of India. The mastery over English of Bengal's literate classes is a well-known factor in the spread of Bengali influence into eastern and upper India in the train of British rule. The advantages Bengalis had acquired through their command over the language of their masters, however much 'babu English' was mocked by their overlords, had helped them benefit from the growing British dominion over India. Now the twice-born and literate castes of Bengal hoped to deploy these well-honed skills to their advantage in independent India. The assault on English as a language of government threatened one of the few remaining weapons in the much-depleted armoury which Bengal's bhadralok still possessed. So at last Bengal's representatives in the Constituent Assembly were spurred into reacting, and they produced a

[90] For a full account of these debates, see *ibid.*, pp. 235–305.

spate of resolutions and amendments, all designed to keep English as India's official language and to extend its shelf life from ten to fifteen years. The Bengali representatives succeeded in this campaign, but only by eliciting support from other provinces.[91]

The campaign to defend English forced the West Bengalis in the Assembly into a belated, and somewhat reluctant, alliance with representatives from the other presidencies, mainly from Madras, who had taken the lead in the battle to keep English as an official language.[92] Pandit Lakshmi Kanta Maitra told the 'Hindi-wallahs' that 'it was no use repeating *ad nauseam* the new dictum that independence will be meaningless if we do not start talking in Hindi or conducting official business in Hindi from tomorrow':

> This is a sort of fanaticism, this is linguistic fanaticism, which if allowed to grow and develop will ultimately defeat the very object they have in view. I therefore plead to them for a little patience and forbearance towards those who, for the time being, cannot speak the language of the North.[93]

By comparison with the more extreme attacks which followed in the course of an increasingly acrimonious debate, this was a moderately worded plea. Members from the south were less restrained. T. T. Krishnamachari sounded a 'warning' that the secessionists in the south would have their hands immeasurably strengthened if 'honourable friends' from the United Provinces insisted on 'flogging their idea [of] "Hindi-Imperialism"'.[94] In the end, the demand that Hindi be India's official language failed, but only because the wiser counsels of India's elder statesmen prevailed, at least for the time being. The Congress high command, appalled by this display of fratricidal strife, strove to achieve a compromise. Hindi was listed in the constitution as India's official language, but this was a symbolic gesture since the constitution laid down that English was to be the language of union affairs for fifteen years in the first instance, extendable for a further period by resolution of Parliament.[95]

This ugly row over the official language of India put the Bengalis in the Assembly on the back foot and exposed the weaknesses inherent in their

[91] See the amendments moved by P. K. Sen, Monomohan Das and G. S. Guha in Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 5-A/49.

[92] For an account of the history of Tamil nationalism which inspired some of the representatives from Madras to reject 'Hindi imperialism' with such vehemence, see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the tongue. Language devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970*, Berkeley, 1997, pp. 56–77.

[93] *CAD* VII, p. 249. [94] *Ibid.*, p. 235.

[95] For details of the so-called Munshi–Ayyangar formula, see *CAD* IX, pp. 1321–3; and Austin, *The Indian constitution*, pp. 296–7.

strategy. Until this juncture, Bengalis had chosen to portray themselves not simply as friends of the centre but as an integral part 'of the centre', believing that this 'special relationship' was their best security for the future. But the language question showed just how unsafe a warranty this would prove to be. The Bengalis now realised the powerful influence north India would have over government at the centre whenever the Hindi-speaking provinces chose to combine against the rest. It also revealed the latent envy and hostility that so many north Indians had towards their neighbours in Bengal. The violence of their attacks forced the West Bengal contingent, for the first time in the life of the Constituent Assembly, to retreat into the laagers of provincial particularism. The language issue pushed them into joining with others who previously they had been wont to describe as the forces of 'regionalism'. It led the Bengalis to rub shoulders with allies in the south who, when needs dictated, were even ready to threaten secession from India on this issue. The language question made Bengal swim against the mainstream of India's public life.[96] Pandit Maitra's plaintive plea for moderation revealed the insecurity of a political class which had come to realise that its strategy of depending on the centre was beginning to fall apart.

West Bengal and the constitution

If the quarrel over language had exploded earlier in the life of the Constituent Assembly, perhaps the Constitution of India would have been very different from what, at the end of the day, found its way on to the statute books. If the maritime provinces had earlier seen the dangers to their particularist interests of a strong centre and if they had put up a concerted fight to win a greater measure of autonomy, perhaps Bengal would have followed a different path in the Assembly and would have relied less heavily on the centre. And if Bengal had seen the sense of forging tactical alliances with other provinces with similar concerns to its own, the constitutional outcome might have been significantly different.

But by the time Algu Rai Shastri threw down his gauntlet, it was too late for Bengal to change course. The draft constitution had already been drawn up and had done the rounds of the provincial assemblies for their final comments. It had also been decided that no major changes were to be allowed at this late stage. In September 1948, the West Bengal Legislative Assembly had discussed the draft constitution and found little

[96] See, for instance, the contrarian stance taken by the Bengali expert on the Official Language Commission: *Report of the Official Language Commission (1956)*, Government of India Press, New Delhi, 1957.

to fault in it. Indeed, the Treasury benches in West Bengal were fulsome in their praise for it, with the premier Dr B. C. Roy making a rousing speech in support which stated that 'fraternity' was 'the need of the hour'. Even the opposition had no serious criticisms to levy against Delhi's handiwork. The communist Jyoti Basu, soon to be leader of the opposition and later the chief minister of West Bengal's Left Front government, could see that 'more and more powers [were] being concentrated in the Centre and residuary powers . . . being denied to the provinces',[97] but his main concern was to attack the provincial ministry for locking up communists. The left-wing contingents in the Bengal Assembly reserved their sharpest barbs for the generous salaries which the new ministers and governors gave themselves, not for Bengal's complicity in allowing the centre to have overwhelming powers under the new constitution. The most trenchant criticisms of the centre's constitutional dominance came, interestingly, from a handful of Muslim members. Abul Hashem, former general secretary of the Bengal Muslim League, condemned the draft constitution for reducing the provinces to the position of 'glorified District Boards'.[98] Not surprisingly, his criticisms gained little support from the phalanx of Hindus in Bengal who thought they had achieved their promised land. Most members of the West Bengal Assembly welcomed a strong centre. Suresh Chandra Banerjee, who had represented Bengal in the Constituent Assembly in New Delhi, declared himself satisfied that the draft had described India as a 'Union of States' rather than a 'Federation which certainly implies a good deal of looseness', since 'India now wants unity most'.[99] Bimal Comar Ghose, who liked to think that he knew a thing or two about constitutions, admitted that there was 'no getting away from the fact that these articles give large powers to the Centre'. In his considered opinion, this was 'not a bad thing', since it would help avoid 'complications' and since 'planning should be on a Central rather than on a Provincial basis'.[100] Sushil Kumar Banerjee argued that, 'India having been divided, the exigencies of circumstances demanded a strong Centre, and it is therefore natural that the constitution-makers have changed their original outlook and have recommended that residuary powers should remain with the centre.'[101] Bimal Chandra Sinha was disappointed that Bengal's case had not been referred to the Linguistic Provinces Commission, with the potential for redrawing

[97] 'Special motion under Rule 85 of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly Procedure Rules on the Draft Constitution', Assembly Proceedings Official Report, *West Bengal Legislative Assembly, Third Session* (*September 1948*), West Bengal Government Press, Alipore, 1948, p. 99.

[98] *Ibid.*, p. 117. [99] *Ibid.*, p. 73. [100] *Ibid.*, p. 103. [101] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Bengal's frontiers that such a reference would have involved, but declared that 'it would be unwise for us to allow the provinces to go about their own way'.[102] Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, ousted some six months earlier from his post as premier by a convoluted putsch, endorsed Article 3 of the draft constitution, which gave the centre the power to redraw provincial boundaries, and even to rename the provinces themselves after only the most nominal consultation with the provinces affected by these changes. In fact, Ghosh was prepared to let the centre have untrammelled authority in this matter, since if 'the members of the legislature representing that area [were] allowed to give their opinion on this . . . you will never get [the boundaries] changed . . . Therefore it should be left to Parliament to do it.'[103] Yesterday's premier of West Bengal showed himself ready today to hand over to Delhi unfettered say over the future frontiers of a new province of which he had been the first, and somewhat short-lived, custodian.

Once again Bengal had revealed its willingness to surrender, with no strings attached, critically important powers to the centre in the expectation that Delhi would look after the province. West Bengal, with Dr Ghosh at the fore, had first-hand experience of the inwardness of boundary disputes. In September 1948, while the draft constitution was being discussed in the Provincial Assembly, West Bengal was already embroiled in bitter disputes with Assam, Bihar and Orissa about boundaries on three sides. Ghosh, as West Bengal's former premier, knew just how critical and sensitive an issue boundary adjustments were likely to be for his province. Yet he remained confident in his faith that West Bengal would do well out of any central award. Parliament, he believed, would 'get the boundaries changed' in West Bengal's favour. The provincial legislators of West Bengal showed that they were singing from the same songbook as their choir at the centre. They too were ready to give the centre unfettered powers over the provinces in the belief that their newly created state of West Bengal not only needed, but could reliably depend upon getting, aid from the strong centre they had helped to create.

In the aftermath of the language debate in the Constituent Assembly, worrying doubts about the soundness of this strategy had begun to emerge; but by then it was too late to make a U-turn. On 15 November 1949, just eleven days before the constitution was formally signed,

[102] *Ibid.*, p. 122. In May 1948, a commission had finally been set up to examine issues to do with forming linguistic provinces. But the Congress high command, particularly Nehru and Patel, ensured that the so-called Dar Commission's remit was restricted to report only on the formation of the provinces of Andhra, Kerala, Karnataka and Mahrashtra. See 'Report of the Linguistic Provinces Commission', *Reports. Third series*, pp. 180–239.

[103] 'Special motion on the Draft Constitution', p. 90.

Dr Ambedkar smuggled in a new article which put yet sharper teeth into the president's emergency powers. West Bengal's representatives kept quiet about this sleight of hand, although men from other provinces angrily denounced it.[104] Disregarding the high command's whip,[105] Kunzru, Thakur Das Bhargava from the East Punjab and Biswanath Das from Orissa fought tooth and nail against this unwelcome addition to the centre's powers, but not a single Bengali spoke up.[106] A month earlier, in October 1949, Bengal had stood by impotently while Ambedkar introduced an eleventh-hour amendment to draft article 306, and finessed the so-called Temporary and Transitional Powers through the Assembly. By this amendment, the centre gave itself the power, for five years in the first instance, to legislate on trade and commerce in textiles, paper, foodstuffs, petroleum, coal, iron and steel: in other words, on every single strategic commodity.[107] At the same time, Ambedkar announced that the rehabilitation of displaced persons had been moved to the concurrent list of subjects, thus giving the centre the power to legislate on refugees, who would soon become Bengal's most pressing concern.[108] These were all matters in which West Bengal had a vital interest. But true to form, its silent dozen in the Assembly made not a whisper of protest.

[104] This provision was adopted as Article 365 of the constitution.

[105] Retzlaff concludes that, in late 1948 and 1949, 'it is fairly evident that the Congress [high command] in an attempt to speed up the procedures of the Constituent Assembly, which had been drastically lagging, had imposed a whip and precluded debate' on many key matters to do with the sharing of powers between the centre and the provinces: Retzlaff, 'The Constituent Assembly of India', pp. 336–7.

[106] *CAD* IX–X, pp. 506–12.

[107] This became Article 369 of the Indian constitution: *CAD* X, pp. 3–7.

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 6. In 1954, when Article 369 lapsed, many of these subjects were added to Item 33 of the Concurrent List by the Third Amendment Act of 1954, thereby permanently placing them under the centre's writ: Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 205, n. 63.

Part II

The Bengal diaspora

Ordinary people, soon forgotten – not for them any Martyr's Memorials or Eternal Flames.

Amitav Ghosh, *The Shadow Lines*

This business of shifting millions of people is beyond our capacity.

Jawaharlal Nehru

3 Partition and migration: refugees in West Bengal, 1947–1967

Building new nations, as one commentator has observed, is a 'refugee-generating process'.[1] Efforts to create homogeneous nation states change some subjects into minorities who find themselves on the 'wrong' side of new borders or in the 'wrong' state, with the 'wrong' ethnicity, language or religion. Minorities are made to feel they should belong somewhere else, that they should be 'nationals' of some other new state made up of 'people like them'. New nations tend to leave large numbers of people stranded in countries they can no longer call their own, with the choice of having to seek refuge somewhere else or to remain where they are as second-class citizens. Many are forced across frontiers and become refugees or asylum-seekers in other nations. In the aftermath of empire, such migrations have profoundly transformed the demographic landscapes of the modern world.

The partition of the sub-continent into India and Pakistan on the basis of a religious divide is a classic example of this process. It left millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims on the 'wrong' side of the fence and led to an exodus unparalleled in history. Between August and December 1947, 15 million people crossed the western borders between India and Pakistan in both directions and in roughly equal numbers.[2] Many millions of Hindus crossed India's eastern borders with Pakistan into the new state of West Bengal and into Assam and Tripura.[3] In the two decades after partition,

[1] Aristide R. Zolberg, 'The formation of new states as a refugee-generating process', *Annals*, 467 (May 1983). See also Zolberg et al., *Escape from violence*, pp. 232–45.

[2] About 7.5 million Hindus and Sikhs left western Pakistan for India; and over 7 million crossed over in the other direction. The censuses of 1951, both of India and of Pakistan, agree that the numbers of refugees were respectively 7.22 and 7.29 million. Another estimate, by Oskar Spate, suggests that those who went from Pakistan to India numbered 7.4 million, and 7.2 million refugees moved in the other direction: Spate and Learmonth, *India and Pakistan*, p. 130 n.

[3] No one knows precisely how many refugees went to India from East Bengal during this phase. The official, and improbably conservative, estimate for the period of eighteen years from 1946 to 1964 places the total at just under 5 million. See P. N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 15–17. During these years, Hindus left East

a lesser number of about a million and a half Muslims left West Bengal, Bihar, Assam and Tripura to go to East Bengal.[4] Despite the staggering scale of these migrations, their impact on the successor states of India and Pakistan has only very recently begun systematically to be studied, and there has been, as yet, no attempt to construct an analytical overview of this diaspora and its consequences.[5] India's experience, and in particular

Bengal in successive waves and settled in West Bengal or the neighbouring states of Assam and Tripura. The vast majority – three in four refugee families – went to West Bengal. One in ten settled in Tripura, and slightly more, about 13 per cent, went to Assam. Only 2 per cent settled in other parts of India. These refugees were predominantly Hindu Bengalis from East Bengal. A relatively small number were Hindus, again mainly Bengalis, from Sylhet, formerly a part of Assam, and most of them went to Assam and Tripura, which were the parts of India closest to where they came from. In addition, a few refugees from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, mainly Chakma tribal people, drifted into India, particularly into what is now the state of Arunachal Pradesh.

4 There are no accurate counts, or even estimates, of the number of Muslims who left West Bengal. See chapter 4 in this book.

5 Studies of refugees crossing the western border between India and Pakistan include Rai, *Partition and the Punjab*; Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'The demographic upheaval of partition', *South Asia*, 18 (1995); Kudaisya and Tan, *The aftermath of partition in South Asia*; Sarah Ansari, 'Partition, migration and refugees. Responses to the arrival of Muhajirs in Sind during 1947–1948', *South Asia*, 18 (1995); and Qazi Shakil Ahmed, 'Some aspects of population redistribution in Pakistan, 1951–1981', in L. A. Kosinski and K. M. Elahi (eds.), *Population redistribution and development in South Asia*, Dordrecht, 1985. More subjective accounts of these migrations may be found in Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering partition. Violence, nationalism and independence in India*, Cambridge, 2001; and, on women's experience of these migrations, in Urvashi Butalia, *The other side of silence. Voices from the partition of India*, New Delhi, 1998, and Ritu Menon and Kamala Bhasin, *Borders and boundaries. Women in India's partition*, New Delhi, 2000. On the migrations across India's eastern borders with Pakistan, see A. F. M. Kamaluddin, 'Refugee problems in Bangladesh', in Kosinski and Elahi, *Population redistribution*; Myron Weiner, *Sons of the soil. Migration and ethnic conflict in India*, Princeton, 1978; Aninidita Dasgupta, 'Denial and resistance. Sylheti partition refugees in Assam', *Contemporary South Asia*, 10, 3 (2001); Sanjoy Hazarika, *Rites of passage. Border crossings, imagined homelands: India's east and Bangladesh*, New Delhi, 2000; Ranabir Samaddar, *The marginal nation. Transborder migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*, New Delhi, 1999; and Papiya Ghosh, 'Partition's Biharis', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 17, 2 (1997). Some of the environmental implications for India of absorbing refugees are explored in A. B. Mukherji, 'A cultural ecological appraisal of refugee settlement in independent India', in Kosinski and Elahi, *Population redistribution*. Key works on the Hindu refugees in West Bengal include Prafulla Chakrabarti, *The marginal men. The refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1990; and Kanti B. Pakrasi, *The uprooted. A sociological study of the refugees of West Bengal, India*, Calcutta, 1971. See also Pradip Kumar Bose (ed.), *Refugees in West Bengal. Institutional processes and contested identities*, Calcutta, 2000; and Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Reflections on partition in the east*, New Delhi, 1997. Useful general edited collections include Tapan K. Bose and Rita Manchanda (eds.), *States, citizens and outsiders. The uprooted peoples of South Asia*, Kathmandu, 1987; Suvir Kaul (ed.), *Partitions of memory. The afterlife of the partition of India*, New Delhi, 2001; and Ranabir Samaddar (ed.), *Refugees and the state. Practices of asylum and care in India, 1947–2000*, New Delhi, 2003. The classic official and semi-official accounts include M. S. Randhawa, *Out of the ashes. An account of the rehabilitation of refugees from Pakistan in rural areas of East Punjab*, Bombay, 1954; *After partition*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division, Government of India, Delhi,

the experience of the Bengal refugees, is a subject which has still to engage the growing community of scholars who study refugees in other places.

This chapter attempts a modest step in this direction by investigating the complex story of the refugees who migrated to West Bengal. As refugees fled to the west from eastern Bengal in ever larger numbers, governments in Delhi and in Calcutta reluctantly began to accept responsibility for the problem of resettling and rehabilitating them. Survey followed report and report followed survey, with information, sometimes patchy but sometimes detailed, about who these refugees were, when they came into India, where they went and how and in what measure they were 'rehabilitated'. Mining these rich seams raises many questions; it also suggests some fascinating insights into how refugees make their way in their new, but not always welcoming, homelands.

Who were the refugees?

Given the complex tapestry of different peoples who lived in united Bengal, Radcliffe's partition of the province could not avoid leaving large minorities behind on both sides of the divide. The new state of West Bengal contained a population of 21 million, of whom approximately 25 per cent, or 5.3 million, were Muslims. The mere stroke of the cartographers' pen reduced the Muslims in West Bengal from being part of a ruling majority into being a much reduced and vulnerable minority.[6]

Conversely, in East Bengal's population of 39 million, there were 11 million Hindus.[7] Overnight, these Hindus became the subjects of the eastern wing of a new and independent state of Pakistan. What made this a fearsome vivisection was the memory, fresh in everyone's mind, of the recent slaughter of Hindus by the thousands in Noakhali and Tippera and the murderous riots in Calcutta. Acutely conscious of this ugly backdrop of communal rioting and killing, neither the Muslims in West Bengal nor the Hindus in East Pakistan could contemplate a future as minorities with any equanimity. They faced the stark choice between staying on unprotected and discriminated against by their new masters, or leaving

1948; Luthra, *Rehabilitation*; Hiranmoy Bandopadhyay, *Udvastu* ('Refugee', in Bengali), Calcutta, 1990; and U. Bhaskar Rao, *The story of rehabilitation*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Publications Division, Faridabad, 1967.

6 How they coped with their new predicament is discussed in chapter 4.

7 'The Schedule', Radcliffe's Award, 12 August 1947, *PP* VI. These figures, of course, are not precise. The Award was made on the basis of the 1941 census, which was flawed and inaccurate. By 1947, after the war and famine had caused havoc to Bengal's population, all estimates are unavoidably insecure. At best they provide rough orders of magnitude of those who became citizens of the 'wrong' country as a result of partition.

everything behind and facing an uncertain future as refugees in another country.

Every individual and every family of Hindus in East Bengal (and indeed of Muslims in West Bengal) had to make this choice. The Hindus were not a homogeneous community in East Bengal, nor were they evenly distributed in the population. Most of them lived in the southern parts of East Bengal which historically had been the strongholds of Hindu chieftains, broad tracts of territory which included Khulna and Jessore, north Barisal, south Faridpur and Dacca[8] (see map 3.1). But being classified as a Hindu covered a multitude of social groupings. Some belonged to the high castes, whether Brahmins or Kayasthas, who lived mainly around Barisal, Dacca and Bikrampur. These high-caste bhadralok were invariably literate and traditionally had been employed in white-collar professions, and many were highly educated, whether in English or in the vernacular. But most Hindus, perhaps a million from this region and over 4 million in all from eastern Bengal, belonged to social groups of a much lower status, the 'depressed' or 'Scheduled' castes. The Namasudras, Pods and Jalia Kaibartas earned their modest crust chiefly as peasants, labourers and fishermen[9] (see map 3.2).

There was also a sizeable number of Hindus clustered in the north of East Bengal, in the districts of Rangpur and Dinajpur. The most numerous group among them were Rajbangshis, a low caste of tillers of the soil, but in the northern towns *babus* were a ubiquitous presence.[10] Other parts of East Bengal were inhabited by mainly nomadic tribal peoples, Santals in Dinajpur and Rangpur, and Chakmas in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Tippera and Mymensingh. Many of these were returned as Hindus in the 1941 census, even though their place in Hindu caste society was still quite tenuous.

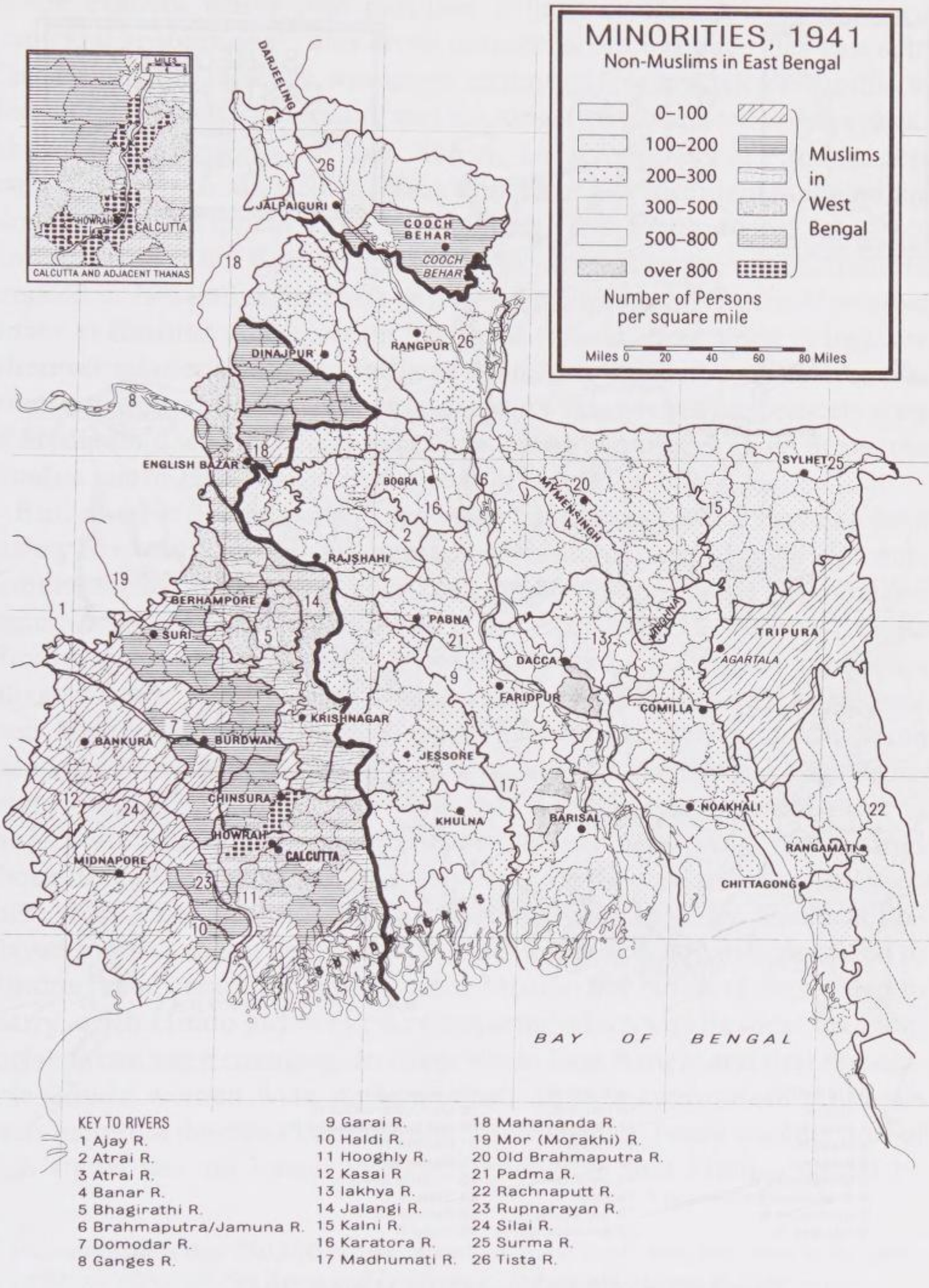
Most of East Bengal's Hindus thus lived in areas in which they were fairly densely packed. But others were thinly spread over the *mofussil* or in rural localities. Significant numbers were landlords, settled in the countryside; others worked as teachers or accountants on *zamindari* estates.[11]

[8] S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 42.

[9] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *Caste, protest and identity in colonial India. The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872–1947*, London, 1997, gives an excellent account of the complexities of caste structure in rural eastern Bengal.

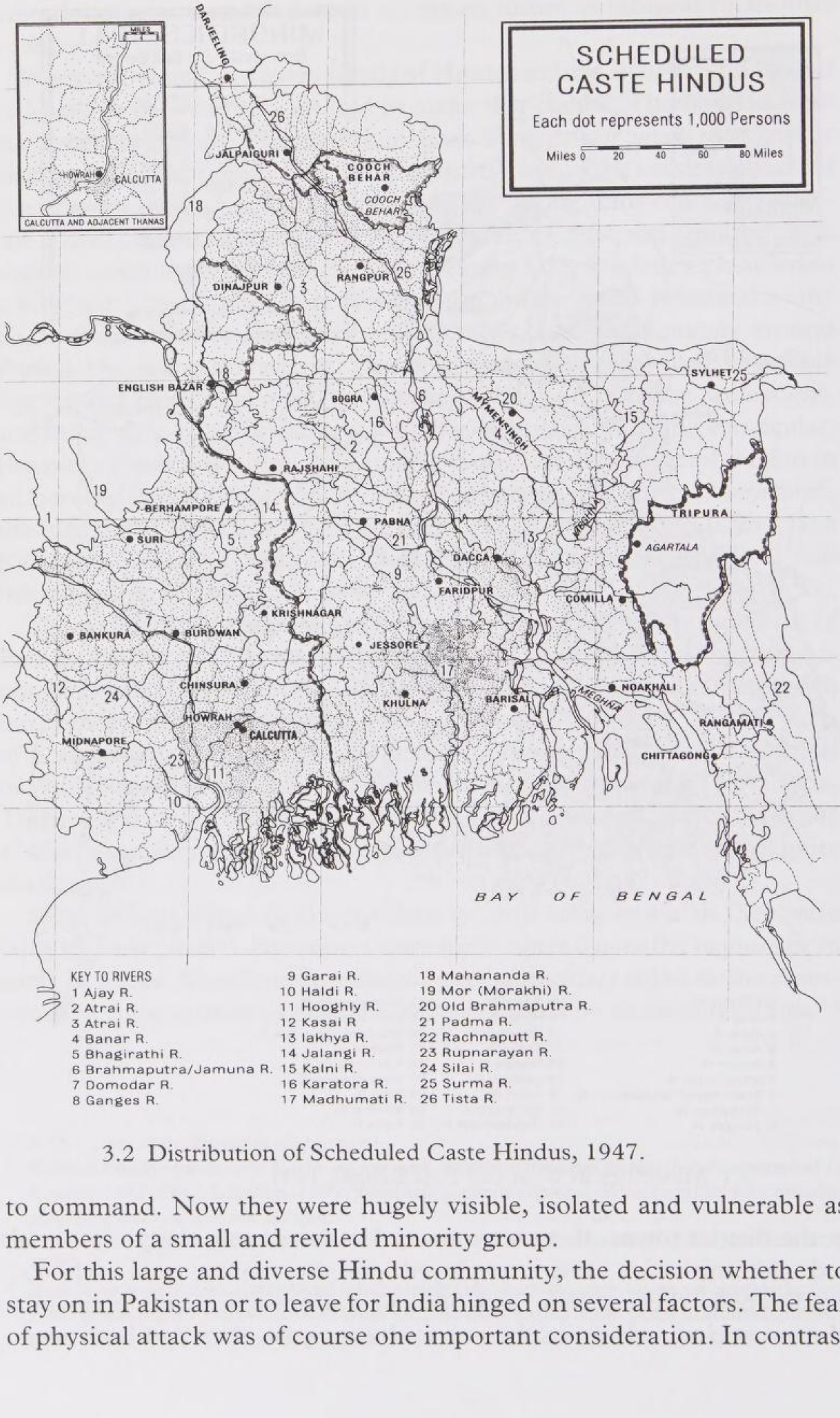
[10] Hariprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Internal migration in India. A case study of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1987, p. 178.

[11] Zamindaris were the usually large landholdings to which the zamindars, or landlords, had been granted the right of tax-collection and the duty to pay these taxes to central government. This right was fixed in perpetuity by the Permanent Settlement of 1793.



3.1 Minorities in West and East Bengal, 1941.

In the district towns, there were many Hindus among the professional and administrative men employed in the courts and schools. Traditionally these people had been at the apex of a predominantly Muslim society, which, in the not-so-distant past, they had been wont



KEY TO RIVERS

1 Ajay R.
2 Atrai R.
3 Atrai R.
4 Banar R.
5 Bhagirathi R.
6 Brahmaputra/Jamuna R.
7 Domodar R.
8 Ganges R.
9 Garai R.
10 Haldi R.
11 Hooghly R.
12 Kasai R
13 lakhya R.
14 Jalangi R.
15 Kalni R.
16 Karatora R.
17 Madhumati R.
18 Mahananda R.
19 Mor (Morakhi) R.
20 Old Brahmaputra R.
21 Padma R.
22 Rachnaputt R.
23 Rupnarayan R.
24 Silai R.
25 Surma R.
26 Tista R.

3.2 Distribution of Scheduled Caste Hindus, 1947.

to command. Now they were hugely visible, isolated and vulnerable as members of a small and reviled minority group.

For this large and diverse Hindu community, the decision whether to stay on in Pakistan or to leave for India hinged on several factors. The fear of physical attack was of course one important consideration. In contrast

to the Punjab, where post-partition killings in some places assumed genocidal proportions[12] and drove minorities out in huge tidal waves, in East Bengal the violence was more contained. Nevertheless, Hindus in Bengal felt acutely vulnerable, and the threat of violence was one reason why so many Bengalis left their homes. Large numbers of Hindus, perhaps 2 million in all, fled to West Bengal in the turbulent wake of the Noakhali and Tippera riots in 1946 and the Khulna riots in 1950. Another million left East Bengal when violence between the communities erupted in 1964 after the theft of holy Muslim relics from the Hazratbal shrine in Kashmir.[13] Migration from east to west also tended to increase wherever relations between India and Pakistan worsened. When the two countries were at odds, whether over India's takeover of the princely state of Hyderabad, or over Kashmir, tensions on the bigger stage drove the Hindus out of East Bengal into India (see table 3.1).

But, as table 3.1 suggests, people left East Bengal when they did for a variety of reasons, not always because of an immediate threat of violence. Subtler forms of discrimination, or sometimes just a general malaise about the new dispensation, were often enough to persuade some Hindus to pack up and leave. A pioneering study of refugees in a Nadia village makes this point. When asked why they had abandoned their homes, those who replied had many different tales to tell. Some mentioned violence, although only a handful of the families had themselves been victims of it. Most spoke of being harassed by Muslims in more humdrum ways. At one end of the spectrum, there were stories about how Muslims 'stole their harvest, cows and boats'. At the other, there were those who felt humiliated by the new boldness Muslims displayed towards them, or resented the fact that 'the way Muslims talked to Hindus [had become] rough'. 'A poor Muslim day labourer demanded to marry a rich Hindu girl' was one complaint which vividly illustrates that social norms were changing dramatically in East Bengal and that respectable Hindu women were no longer safe from inappropriate proposals from men of a despised community.[14] In Pakistan, being wealthy and of high status was no longer sufficient guarantee that Hindus would be

[12] One estimate is that 750,000 people, mainly in the Punjab, lost their lives in the post-partition holocaust. See Spate and Learmonth, *India and Pakistan*, p. 130n.

[13] The mysterious disappearance of the Muy-i-muqaddas (the sacred hair of the Prophet Mohammad) from the Hazratbal shrine in Srinagar sparked off this particular round of troubles. See Muhammad Ishaq Khan, 'The significance of the dargah of Hazratbal in the socio-religious and political life of Kashmiri Muslims', in Christian W. Troll (ed.), *Muslim shrines in India. Their character, history and significance*, Delhi, 1992.

[14] Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Away from home. The movement and settlement of refugees from East Pakistan in West Bengal, India', *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, 12 (2000).

Table 3.1. *Reasons why refugees fled from East Bengal, 1946–1970*

(figures in lakhs (100,000s))

Year	Reasons for influx	Totals	Into West Bengal	Into other states
1946	Noakhali riots	0.19	0.14	0.05
1947	Partition	3.44	2.58	0.86
1948	'Police action' by India in Hyderabad	7.86	5.90	1.96
1949	Communal riots in Khulna and Barisal	2.13	1.82	0.31
1950	Ditto	15.75	11.82	3.93
1951	Kashmir agitation	1.87	1.40	0.47
1952	Worsening of economic conditions; persecution of minorities; passports scare	2.27	1.52	0.75
1953	———	0.76	0.61	0.15
1954	———	1.18	1.04	0.14
1955	Unrest over declaration of Urdu as *lingua franca*	2.40	2.12	0.28
1956	Adoption of Islamic constitution by Pakistan	3.20	2.47	0.73
1957	———	0.11	0.09	0.02
1958	———	0.01	0.01	—
1959	———	0.10	0.09	0.01
1960	———	0.10	0.09	0.01
1961	———	0.11	0.10	0.01
1962	———	0.14	0.13	0.01
1963	———	0.16	0.14	0.02
1964	Riots over Hazratbal incident	6.93	4.19	2.74
1965	———	1.08	0.81	0.27
1966	———	0.08	0.04	0.04
1967	———	0.24	0.05	0.19
1968	———	0.12	0.04	0.08
1969	———	0.10	0.04	0.06
1970	Economic distress and coming elections	2.50	2.32	0.18
TOTALS		52.83	39.56	13.27

Source: P. N. Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1972, pp. 18–19.

accorded the social deference which they had been accustomed to receiving from Muslims in the past, and for many bhadralok Hindus this change was so intolerable that they preferred to get out.[15]

[15] A detailed and fascinating study of 'social tensions' among the refugees conducted by the Indian government's Department of Anthropology in 1951 underlines this point. It concluded that 'what really compelled them to evacuate was not so much the insecurity

Table 3.2. *Reasons why refugees in a Nadia village fled from East Bengal*

Reasons for flight	Number of households
Harassment by Muslims	82
Fear of violence	41
Because they felt or were told that Pakistan was for Muslims and India for Hindus	23
Because everybody fled	16
Suffered from actual violence	9
Business/study	7
Floods/erosion of rivers	5
Anxiety about the future	3

Source: Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Away from home. The movement and settlement of refugees from East Pakistan into West Bengal, India', *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, 12 (2000), p. 88.

Lower down the social scale, many of the refugees in Nadia said they left because 'everyone else' had decided to go (see table 3.2). Others quit because their local patrons had gone to India: 'Landlords and other rich men had gone. How can a poor man like me be there alone?' But most respondents had simply concluded that they had no future in a 'Muslim country', expecting their prospects to be better in India.[16]

The decision to quit was thus based on a quite complex calculus, with Hindus leaving East Bengal when the risks of staying on, in their estimation, outweighed the uncertainties of a future as refugees in India. Leaving home tended to be a family decision, not simply a matter of individual choice. Sometimes the decision was relatively easy to make, particularly when there were prospects of shelter on the other side for the family's most vulnerable members, women, children and the elderly. Wealthy Hindus with property in West Bengal were best placed to make the move since they had homes to go to in the west: most substantial landlords in East Bengal owned considerable 'town houses' in Calcutta. Of course, abandoning East Bengal was deeply traumatic even for these

> of life and property, and the inability to get redress against unprovoked attacks, but a complete sense of frustration in preserving [their] cherished values ... The loss of prestige and social status which the Hindu community previously enjoyed, and the realisation of the futility of regaining it in the future was a far more potent factor in creating the feeling of frustration, than the loss in the economic sphere': B. S. Guha, *Memoir No. 1, 1954. Studies in social tensions among the refugees from eastern Pakistan*, Department of Anthropology, Government of India, Calcutta, 1959, p. viii.

[16] Nakatani, 'Away from home'.

well-to-do people: they had to leave behind beloved friends and treasured landscapes, as well as large estates, palatial homes and the trappings of aristocratic life, and say goodbye to familiar localities where they had long been the people who mattered.[17] Nevertheless many of these families had sufficient assets in West Bengal to sustain a reasonably good life in Calcutta, even as refugees, or perhaps more accurately as 'émigrés'.[18]

Others had less secure footholds on the western side of the border and fewer resources to help them get started there. A very large proportion of the Hindu refugee population were persons of relatively modest means who had some transportable assets and who tended to be literate, with professional skills which could be deployed on the other side.[19] Some had kin in Calcutta or in other towns and connections built up over generations. Dacca and Bikrampur, traditional centres of learning in East Bengal, for many decades had supplied high-caste, white-collar migrants to towns all

[17] Themes of loss, exile and nostalgia recur powerfully in much of the rich literature produced by East Bengali Hindu refugees in the aftermath of partition. Manabendra Bandopadhyaya's two-volume work *Bhed bibhed* ('Prejudice', in Bengali; Calcutta, 1992) contains some of the finest examples of this literature. Alok Bhalla's two-volume collection, *Stories about the partition* (New Delhi, 1994), includes a few important examples of this genre, translated into English. For a discussion of these themes, see Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'The poetry and prejudice of dwelling', in his *Habitations of modernity. Essays in the wake of subaltern studies*, Chicago, 2002.

[18] The zamindars of Teota are an example of families in this position. They owned properties and grand palaces in East Bengal and also had impressive establishments in Calcutta: author's interview with Sri Surjya Sankar Roy, Calcutta, July 1996. Kiran Sankar Roy, a scion of the Teota zamindars, became home minister in the government of West Bengal.

[19] The Department of Anthropology's 1951 investigation classified those refugees as coming from the 'upper middle class' 'when the annual income of his family was Rs 5000 or more derived mainly from rents from the tenants of their land and the sale proceeds of agricultural products ... His father might follow professions such as those of physician, moneylender, businessmen, etc. There was occasional or periodical celebration of expensive social and religious festivals ... The family was accommodated in one or two spacious huts. It also owned a few heads of cattle and other moveable properties such as ornaments ... The subject himself used to earn by following a profession of lawyer, school teacher, "Nayeb [accountant] of zamindary [e]states" and the like. There was always hard cash (ranging from Rs 50,000 to Rs 100,000) in stock in the family which they usually employed in commerce as capital.' In contrast, a refugee was classified as belonging to the 'lower middle class' if 'the annual income of his family was below Rs 5,000 but above Rs 3,000 with less moveable and immoveable properties than those of the upper class. The measure of cultivable land rarely exceeded 6 or 9 bighas (i.e. 2 to 3 acres) and the number of tenants, if any, 10 or 12. The family could afford to save less or possess fewer ornaments and household articles. Pujas and festivals were either not celebrated or very rarely. But they had ample living space ... The subject followed professions such as those of Tahsildari (i.e. the duty of realising revenues from the tenants of a zamindari [e]state), the practice of homeopathy, etc., and his income therefrom ranging [*sic*] from Rs 15 to Rs 50 a month, and sometimes more. This income was always supplemented by a yearly income of Rs 3,000 to 3,500 from commerce in rice, pulses, nuts, etc.': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, p. 20.

over Bengal and particularly to Calcutta.[20] Many of East Bengal's bhadralok, therefore, had somewhere to go in West Bengal: they had relatives or friends who, at the very least, could offer them a temporary roof over their heads when they arrived as refugees. Among those best placed to emigrate in this category were government officers who had been given the option to serve either in India or in Pakistan. If they opted for India, they went with a guarantee of a job, often with the added benefit of tied accommodation.[21] But others among the educated middle classes who were not government servants also had prospects of getting gainful employment in the west. Such people calculated that staying on in Pakistan made less sense than migrating to West Bengal. In Pakistan, they concluded, they would be second-class citizens, stripped of influence, status and security. In India, they might have a struggle to find their feet, but at least they would be among 'their own people'.[22] They had qualifications, they had kin and they had connections. All they wanted was work and shelter, and they calculated they had a reasonable chance of getting both in West Bengal.

In the first wave of Hindu refugees to cross over into West Bengal, therefore, the overwhelming majority were drawn from the ranks of the very well-to-do and the educated middle classes, with assets and skills which they could take with them across the border and, in many cases, with kith and kin on the other side. Of the 1.1 million Hindus who had migrated from the east by 1 June 1948, about 350,000 were urban bhadralok; another 550,000 belonged to the rural Hindu gentry.[23] Many of the rest were businessmen.[24]

Lower down the social ladder, Hindu artisans made similar calculations, albeit in a lesser key. With skills and crafts associated with their castes and used to working for their predominantly Hindu patrons, they concluded that they had a better chance of deploying their talents in the west, particularly after many of their patrons had left East Bengal for India. The makers of the shell bangles that were obligatory ornaments for married Hindu women, the weavers of the fine silks and cottons worn by well-to-do Hindus, the potters who fashioned idols used in Hindu

[20] Chattopadhyaya, *Internal migration in India*, p. 178.

[21] Dr Prafulla Ghosh's ministry ordered all vacancies in the services, created by large numbers of Muslim government employees opting for service in Pakistan, to be filled by refugees from East Bengal. As a result, many lucky refugees got better and higher-paid jobs in the west than they had had in the east.

[22] The Department of Anthropology's 1951 survey of refugees noted that they 'expected a warm welcome, a home or homely atmosphere after their terrible experiences': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, p. 59.

[23] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 1. Saroj Chakrabarty also recalls that the first refugees were 'mostly' middle-class Hindus: *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 95.

[24] Pakrasi, *The uprooted*, p. 108.

festivals, and the priests and astrologers who presided over Hindu rituals of birth, marriage and death were among the earliest migrants to the west. As one man from Noakhali told a reporter in 1948, '95 per cent of the Hindu families had already left. He stayed on but found it extremely difficult to eke out a living. He was a priest . . . He and his family were starving . . . so he made for Calcutta.'[25] Another from Barisal who belonged to the lowly caste of Dholis who traditionally performed ritual functions at Hindu festivals said, 'the pujas, marriages and other functions in the homes of the *Babus* would give us our livelihood. But they have all migrated. Today in East Bengal we are without any occupation. To stay there would mean death to us.'[26] In the first large exodus of Hindu refugees to West Bengal, there were more than 100,000 artisans of this sort.[27]

By contrast, the majority of the Hindus of East Bengal who were peasants, sharecroppers or agricultural labourers found emigration a much more difficult prospect. The only possessions that most of them had were their tiny landholdings,[28] and many were indentured by debt to local patrons and creditors. Most were illiterate, and very few of them had connections in West Bengal or any experience of working there. Admittedly, a small number had by tradition migrated seasonally into West Bengal to bring in the harvest or to help transplant rice, since agricultural labour in some parts of the west tended to pay better than similar work at home.[29] But most of these people had never before left their localities. Before partition, very few of Bengal's poorest peasants had left the land and sought work away from home, whether in the jute mills of Calcutta or the collieries of Asansol. Western Bengal's immigrant labour force had come, in the main, from other parts of India: the miners of Burdwan were *adivasis* from Chhotanagpur; and most workers in the jute mills along the Hooghly river came from the Saran district of Bihar, from the United Provinces and northern Andhra Pradesh, and from the Ganjam district of southern Orissa. Historical circumstance, deeply

[25] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 20 October 1948; also cited in P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 13.

[26] *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 8 October 1948. [27] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 1.

[28] The Department of Anthropology categorised this section as made up of persons who had no landed property except for a house and a plot of garden adjoining it. They included peasants and agricultural labourers but also fishermen, washermen, barbers and milkmen who earned between Rs 30 and 50 a month. 'Celebration of any festival was out of the question for them and they owned practically no ornaments but only household articles which are absolutely necessary': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, p. 20.

[29] Traditionally, poor peasants and landless labourers from Jessore, Khulna, Nadia and Bakarganj in the east travelled every year to the Sundarbans in the west during the harvesting and transplanting seasons and earned above the odds working as seasonal migrants for landlords of newly cleared plots. They usually received 15 per cent of what they harvested as wages in kind: Chattopadhyaya, *Internal migration in India*, p. 58.

influenced by the strategies of recruitment employed by industrialists and planters under the colonial regime, had dictated these patterns. By contrast, the cultivators of eastern Bengal traditionally had been reluctant to migrate in search of work. However severe the pressures of population on land in East Bengal, its fertile alluvial soil was better able to support its people than the less productive soils of the western districts.[30] Since the beginning of the twentieth century, moreover, the peasantry of eastern Bengal had been able to supplement their meagre incomes growing cash crops such as jute, which, at least until the depression of the 1930s, fetched a good price in the market. The reluctance of the peasants to leave these modest but well-tested prospects behind in order to go west in search of work was so marked that one census superintendent had memorably described East Bengal's peasants as 'above all a domestic, stay-at-home people'.[31] War and partition had helped the price of raw jute to recover, and rice commanded high returns. Those peasants who had even a tiny surplus of produce to sell in the market were understandably disinclined to abandon their fields and their little store of cash crops to make a new life as labourers in the harsh conditions of the mills and mines of the west.

So when they became victims of the haphazard violence of partition, these Hindu peasants found themselves faced with an impossible dilemma. Migrating to West Bengal was for them a deeply insecure prospect. They had few skills or assets, and no connections or experience of life on the other side. Unlike the economic migrants from the north Indian countryside who had flocked to Calcutta, if these peasants decided to leave they had to take with them their entire families, bag and baggage. In consequence, they stood to lose the little they possessed back home, even if it was only a tiny piece of land, barely sufficient for subsistence. They also had to leave behind their modest social networks of small-time patrons and petty creditors. In the climate of post-partition Bengal, they were unlikely to get a fair price from local Muslims for their land or, once they reached their destination, of being able to buy, or to lease, a

[30] Asok Mitra, the census superintendent for West Bengal in 1951, having studied these long-term demographic trends, concluded that 'a stage has been reached in West Bengal when a rural population with a density of not much more than 500 per square mile tends to decrease off and on or remain stationary. The loss of Eastern and Northern Bengal has removed areas of varying capacity of the soil, so that the soil in West Bengal is of a fairly uniform fertility, except in the extreme western fringes. In parts of East Bengal it is possible for a population over 1,000 persons per square mile to go on increasing rapidly, while a population less than half as dense in rural districts in West Bengal remains stationary': *1951 Census*, p. 196.

[31] Cited in the *Census of India 1961*, vol. XVI, part I A, book (i) (henceforth *1961 Census*), pp. 283–4.

smallholding in the overcrowded and infertile countryside of West Bengal. So, although staying on in East Bengal left them living in fear and prey to harassment, many preferred that unattractive option to weighing anchor and throwing themselves adrift upon an unfamiliar sea.

In consequence, proportionately fewer humble Hindu peasants chose to leave than their better-off co-religionists from the middling classes. Peasants were only about 40 per cent of all the refugees, although they represented three-quarters of East Bengal's Hindus.[32] Significantly only one in four refugee families came from the very bottom of the social pile, from the ranks of the Scheduled Castes or of tribal peoples.[33] When low-caste peasants did migrate, they tended to do so under circumstances rather different from those which persuaded the better-off to get up and leave. By and large, they abandoned the little they possessed in the east only when they were driven out by extreme violence or by intolerable hardship. Very few peasants left in the first waves of migration after partition which took place from 1947 to 1949, when conditions in East Bengal were relatively peaceful. When peasants fled East Bengal in large numbers at the end of 1949 and early in 1950, they did so because they were the victims of terrifying communal furies in the rural tracts of Khulna, Jessore, Barisal and Faridpur. The level of migration of the poor and lowly continued to rise, but peasants tended to leave only when the spectre of communal violence stalked the land.[34] They fled for their lives, taking nothing with them, and despite the fact they had nowhere to go in the west, no kin, no friends, no associates, no jobs and not even some of their own caste folk with whom they could take temporary refuge on the other side of the border. Inevitably, the rehabilitation of these unfortunates in West Bengal proved to be quite a different matter from that of the middle classes,[35]

[32] *Report of the committee of ministers for the rehabilitation of displaced persons in West Bengal*, Government of India Press, Calcutta, 1954 (henceforth *Report of the committee of ministers, 1954*), p. 28.

[33] *Rehabilitation of refugees. A statistical survey (1955)*, State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Alipore, 1956 (henceforth *Statistical survey, 1956*), p. 2.

[34] *Report on how the millions who came from Eastern Pakistan live here. They live again*, Government of West Bengal, 1954.

[35] This is substantiated by Guha's 1951 survey. Comparing the poor peasant refugees settled at the government camp at Jirat with the middle-class Hindus who settled themselves at Azadgarh, it notes that the Jirat subjects had migrated much later in the context of 'communal upheavals' and 'were destitutes when they came to India because they had lost almost all the money and household articles [they had possessed]', whereas those at Azadgarh had 'left Pakistan much earlier . . . and avoided communal upheavals to a greater extent', and had managed 'to bring some moveable articles and cash': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, pp. 60–1.

and indeed from that of their peasant brethren from the western Punjab.[36]

A remarkable paradox thus emerges from an analysis of the changing composition of the refugee population. Those Hindus with the greatest wealth, who had the most to lose in terms of worldly goods, tended to get out quickly after partition. In contrast, lowly Hindus who had the least to lose, and who had no social status or economic independence and were most vulnerable to violence and discrimination, were the most reluctant to leave and hung on at home as long as they could. The minorities who did not leave at all but stayed behind in East Bengal belonged, in the main, to those sections of Hindu society which were the weakest and the poorest and had the fewest options. Muslims moving in the opposite directions also did so in similar patterns and for similar reasons. This would have far-reaching consequences for the ways in which these minority groups came to be integrated, or not as the case might be, into the new nations created by partition.[37]

Where refugees settled

The reasons why people became refugees thus were not random. Likewise, where the refugees chose to go was also not a matter of chance. Most refugees went to places which 'made sense' for them and for their families.

The data about where refugees chose to settle in West Bengal reveal quite striking patterns. The Census of 1951 discovered that most of the refugees from East Bengal ended up in just three districts of West Bengal, the 24 Parganas, Calcutta and Nadia. In 1951, of a total of 2,099,000 refugees recorded by the Census, 1,387,000, or two-thirds, were found in these three districts,[38] a fact graphically demonstrated in figure 3.1. Four other districts, West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri and Burdwan absorbed much of the remaining third.[39] Ten years later, the Census of 1961 revealed exactly the same pattern. Refugees in West Bengal, now over 3 million people in total, were found in the same parts

[36] As Rai has shown, Punjabi peasant refugees were escorted out of Pakistan under the protection of the Military Evacuation Organisation and were swiftly given temporary plots, abandoned by fleeing Muslims, to farm: Rai, *Partition of the Punjab*, pp. 72–89.

[37] Sri Lankan refugees displayed similar trends: see Nicholas Van Hear, *New diasporas. The mass exodus, dispersal and regrouping of migrant communities*, London, 1998.

[38] Of these, 527,000 went to the 24 Parganas, 433,000 to Calcutta and 427,000 to Nadia: *1951 Census*, p. 305.

[39] Before 1951, 115,000 refugees settled in West Dinajpur, 100,000 in Cooch Behar, 99,000 in Jalpaiguri and 96,000 in Burdwan: *ibid.*, p. 305.

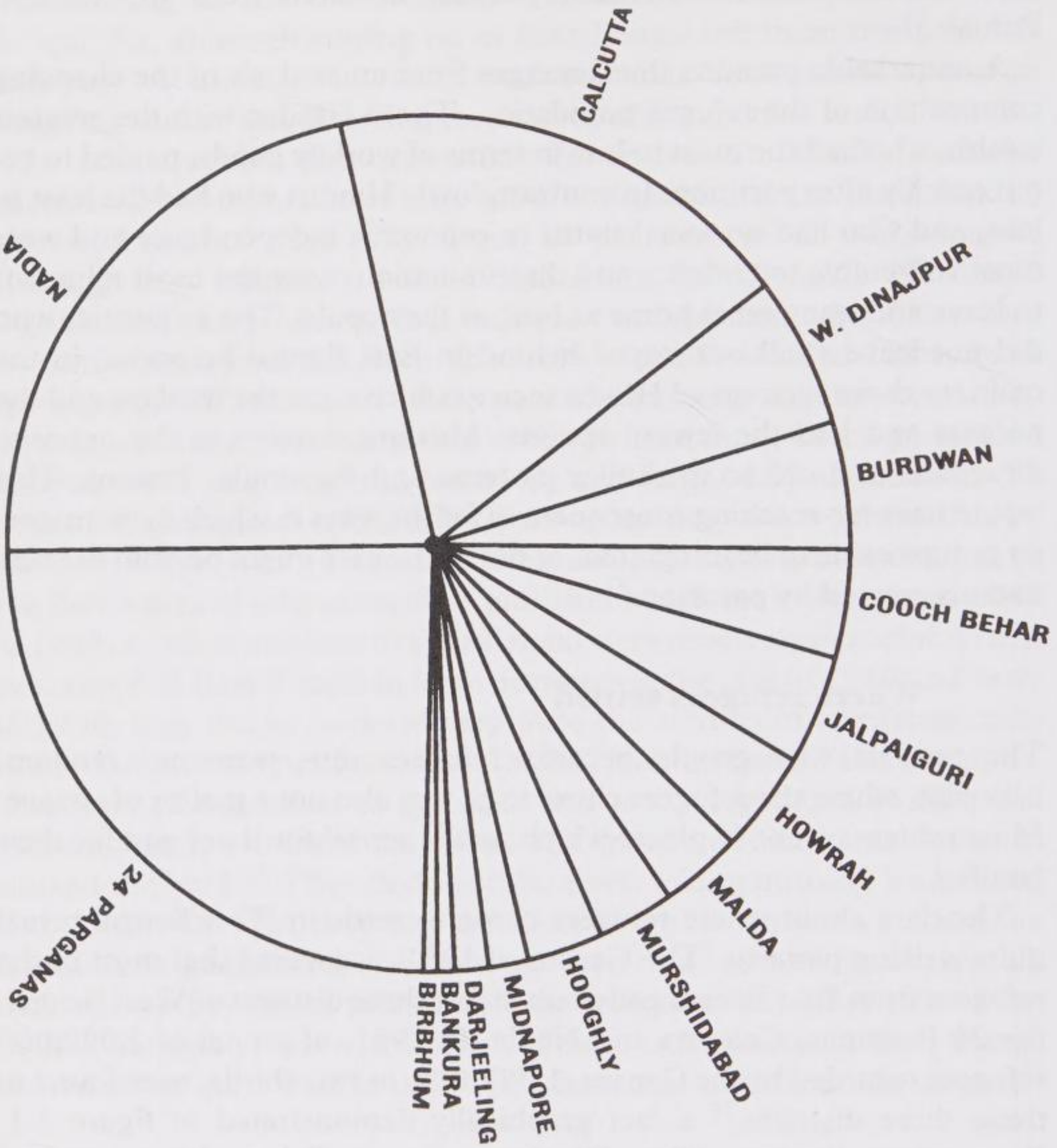
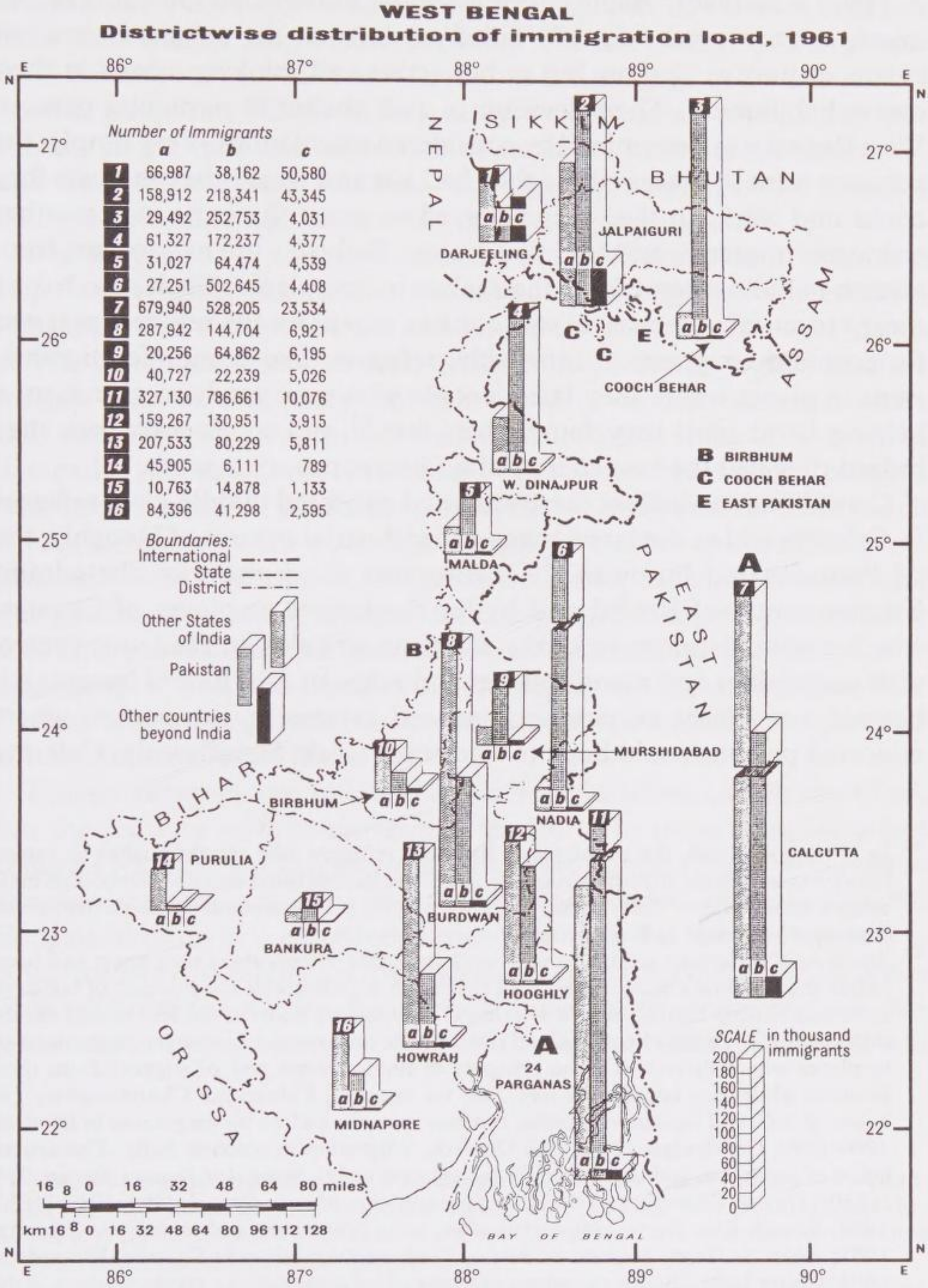


Figure 3.1 Distribution of refugees by district, 1954.

of the province as a decade before[40] (see map 3.3). In 1973, surveys of refugees showed that their numbers had doubled in the previous decade and now constituted more than 6 million, but that the patterns of settlement remained the same as they had been in 1951 and in 1961.[41]

[40] *1961 Census*, p. 368.

[41] 'Concentration of refugees in West Bengal, December, 1973', *Proposals for allocation of special funds for refugee concentrated areas in West Bengal in the fifth five-year plan*, Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, 1974, cited in Pranati Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal. A study of the growth and distribution of refugee settlements within the CMD', Occasional Paper No. 55, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1983.



3.3 Pattern of refugee settlement in West Bengal, 1961 (*Census of India, 1961*, vol. XVI, part I-A, book (i)).

These remarkably stable patterns can be understood once it is recognised, as government signally failed to do, that the refugees were not pawns or passive victims, but rather active and thinking agents in their own rehabilitation. Their decision to seek shelter in particular parts of West Bengal was determined by considered calculations. Very simply, the refugees went to places where they had kin and where they thought they could find work. In this, they behaved in much the same way as other economic migrants, and for good reason. Refugees too had to start from scratch to build a new life for themselves in new places. Their search for a means to sustain themselves was quite as urgent for the refugees as it was for economic migrants.[42] Inevitably, refugees, like economic migrants, went to places where they knew people who were ready to give them a helping hand until they found their feet,[43] and to places where they judged they had the best chance of finding appropriate work.

Considerations such as these attracted educated middle-class refugees to Calcutta and to the large towns and industrial centres of Hooghly, the 24 Parganas and Burdwan.[44] Calcutta was the capital city, the administrative centre of Bengal and by far the largest employer of literates, whether administrators or clerks. Calcutta was also an academic centre, with universities and many colleges and schools. As a hub of business, it housed many large corporations as well as smaller companies, where educated persons could hope to find some work. Significantly, Calcutta

[42] In November 1948, the problems of destitute refugees who sought shelter in camps became more urgent after the government of West Bengal ruled that no able-bodied male refugee could receive 'doles' either for himself or for his dependants for more than seven days after he arrived in West Bengal.

[43] South Asia's migrants tended to seek work in places where others they knew had been before them. Some scholars argue that this trend demonstrates the strength of bonds of caste and kinship among India's working classes; others point to the less arcane reason that migration is a risky business, and that it made obvious good sense for migrants to go to places where there was some prospect of finding work and of support from their kinsmen while they found their feet. See, for instance, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The origins of industrial capitalism in India. Business strategies and the working classes in Bombay, 1900–1940*, Cambridge, 1994; Gail Omvedt, 'Migration in colonial India. The articulation of feudalism and capitalism by the colonial state', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 7, 2 (1980); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history. Bengal, 1890–1940*, Delhi, 1989; Ranajit Das Gupta, *Migrant workers, rural connections and capitalism*, Calcutta, 1987; Arjan de Haan, *Migrant workers and industrial capitalism in Calcutta*, Rotterdam, 1994; Chitra Joshi, 'Bonds of community, ties of religion. Kanpur textile workers in the early twentieth century', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 22, 3 (1985); and Joshi, *Lost worlds. Indian labour and its forgotten histories*, Delhi, 2003.

[44] In 1951, the census superintendent observed that the influx of refugees was the main cause of the spectacular growth in population between 1941 and 1951 in districts such as the 24 Parganas, Calcutta, Jalpaiguri, Howrah, Burdwan and Hooghly. Refugees went to places where there was industry or plantations, 'neglecting agricultural parts': *1951 Census*, p. 139.

had the added attraction of having taken in a quarter of a million migrants from East Bengal long before partition.[45] These 'Bangaals', as people from the east were labelled by 'Ghotis', or the Bengalis of the west, could provide temporary shelter to their relatives and friends who poured into the city in the turbulent aftermath of partition. In much the same way, and for much the same reasons, the bigger towns of West Bengal now became powerful magnets drawing middle-class refugees.[46]

For similar sorts of reasons, artisans too were attracted to cities and large towns rather than to the countryside. Although few surveys have identified where artisans went and how they made new lives for themselves, incidental and anecdotal evidence from urban studies of other matters suggests that many settled in towns or on their outskirts, where they could continue to ply their traditional trades. A study of the town of Titagarh, dominated by jute mills, discovered that many refugees 'engaged in artisanal production, especially making bangles from conch shells, their caste work . . . in East Bengal';[47] another study of the unorganised or informal sector of Calcutta's complex economy revealed that many tailors were Hindu refugees from the east.[48] Congress records show that after partition several thousand Nath weavers settled in the town of Nabadwip.[49] The middle classes and artisans among the refugees thus flocked in very large numbers in and around the already overcrowded urban centres of West Bengal.

Peasant refugees also followed distinct tracks which can be identified, but the patterns of their movement tended to be more complex. Most refugees who had worked on the land in East Bengal tended to cluster in agrarian, or semi-agrarian, tracts along the borders between the two Bengals, settling in the border districts of Nadia and the 24 Parganas in southern and central Bengal. Smaller numbers settled in the border zones of West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar and Murshidabad. None of these districts had attracted economic migrants before partition. Their soil was

[45] The 1951 census discovered over 250,000 persons born in what by then was Pakistan, but who had settled there *before* partition: *ibid.*, p. 248. In 1961, the census also found that one in every five migrants from East Pakistan to Calcutta had arrived there more than two years before partition: *1961 Census*, pp. 370–1.

[46] Just over half of all the East Bengal refugees ended up in towns: *Statistical survey, 1956*, p. 2.

[47] De Haan, *Unsettled settlers*, pp. 68–9.

[48] Nirmala Banerjee, *Women workers in the unorganised sector. The Calcutta experience*, Hyderabad, 1985, p. 36.

[49] Kaviraj Biseswar Nath of the Nath community of weavers claimed that 60,000 of his fellow caste members had settled in Nabadwip after partition: Biseswar Nath to Maulana Azad, 2 September 1955, AICC-II, PB-21/1955.

not fertile, it was not well drained, and their economies were not prospering. In fact, for many decades before partition their populations, just as their local economies, had been stagnant or in decline. Nadia, which had become home to almost half a million refugees by 1951, had experienced what Asok Mitra described as a history of 'appalling depopulation' between 1872 and 1921, and its numbers continued to fall during the 1920s and 1930s.[50] Murshidabad was another district whose economy and population had slumped since the later nineteenth century, when the course of the Ganges had shifted to the west and south.[51] The districts of Cooch Behar and West Dinajpur were sleepy hollows, offering little employment to potential migrants. And yet, between 1947 and 1961, close to a million refugees chose to settle in these four districts.[52]

The reasons why refugee peasants settled in these unpromising tracts are complex, but are capable of being investigated and understood. Communal rioting and violence provided the context for some of this settlement, particularly in Nadia. During the riots of 1949 and 1950 in Khulna and Jessore, Namasudra peasants fled the mobs which attacked them and crossed the nearest border. Once they entered India, they joined local Hindu rioters who drove Muslims out in retaliation.[53] The next step was to occupy by force plots which these Muslims had cultivated in what amounted to 'a large-scale virtual exchange of population'.[54] Without the context of violence, it would have been virtually impossible for these peasant refugees to find any arable land in these unpromising parts.

But there were also many peasant refugees who settled more peaceably along the border. In the main they did so because they had kin, often by marriage, in these districts. In the past, as we have seen, men from eastern Bengal had not been keen to migrate westwards. Bengali women, in contrast, traditionally went where their husbands lived. Historically this had led to a fair amount of migration of brides between the districts adjacent to the border most directly affected by partition.[55] Peasants forced to flee from the east may have had no previous experience of living and working in the west, but in many cases had relatives by marriage on

[50] The decay of the district's river system seriously affected irrigation and drainage, and made cultivation difficult, commerce unprofitable and public health poor, while the insecurity of tenure due to the *utbandi* system meant the district did not attract peasant entrepreneurs: *1951 Census*, p. 248. The 1951 census calculated that, without the refugees, the population of Nadia would have continued to fall: *ibid.*, p. 139.

[51] In the early twentieth century, the decline of the silk industry in Jiaganj had led to an outflow of silk workers from the district: Chattopadhyaya, *Internal migration*, p. 66.

[52] Statement V-29, *1961 Census*, p. 369. [53] This theme is discussed in chapter 4.

[54] *1951 Census*, pp. 252–3. [55] *1961 Census*, pp. 283–4.

Table 3.3. *Reasons for arrival at Village M in Nadia*

Reasons for settling in Village M	Number of households
Relatives (patrilineal) were there	35
Relatives (affinal) were there	31
Relatives (matrilineal) were there	17
People from the same locality were there	11
Persons of the same caste were there	9
Kin in distant relationship were there	5
Through the exchange of properties with Muslims	14
Business or service	13
By government rehabilitation	7
Without any connection	19
Other reasons	13
Unknown	14
TOTAL	188

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: Tetsuya Nakatani, 'Away from home. The movement and settlement of refugees from East Pakistan into West Bengal, India', *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, 12 (2000), p. 89.

'the other side'. Circumstances now forced them to utilise these connections in ways which would have been unthinkable in more ordinary times, given the strong taboo in Hindu family custom against accepting hospitality from the in-laws of daughters given in marriage. But now this taboo was broken by the harsh necessities of abnormal times.

Nakatani's study of a border village into which Namasudra refugees flooded shows that about half the families who found shelter in this village came 'through relatives', utilising 'not only ties of kinship, but also affinal relations'.[56] Frequently, these kinsfolk helped the refugees to identify available land to buy or to rent:[57] 'refugees sought land by making use of their own connections with people like relatives who had already settled [there]'.[58] Very often it was female relatives – married daughters or sisters, maternal grandparents or aunts – who helped them settle (see table 3.3).

[56] Tetsuya Nakatani, 'The strategies of movement and settlement of refugees from East Pakistan to West Bengal, India', unpublished paper presented at the Indo-Dutch Conference on Displaced People in South India, Chennai, March 2001.
[57] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[58] *Ibid.* Government loans and schemes sometimes gave some assistance, but the main plank in the government's policy was to settle peasant refugees in vacant tracts of land, preferably outside West Bengal.

This was a significant reversal of traditional patterns of migration in South Asia, in which men tended to go ahead, establish themselves, and then bring their families and other male associates to join them in their new base. These novel patterns among refugees upset the conventional, resolutely patrilocal and patrilineal familial relationships of rural Bengal, with consequences which are still little understood.

Yet all too frequently such land that refugee peasants were able to cobble together in this way with help from their relatives in these poor agrarian tracts was not sufficient to support entire families. The holdings the refugees were able to acquire were usually too small or were made up of several tiny plots at some distance from each other, so that even the most determined tiller of the soil could not scratch a living out of them. Given that these were agricultural districts which had been in decline long before 1947, the soil that the refugees acquired (other than through appropriation) tended to be of very poor quality, which of course was why it was there to be had in the first place.[59]

This explains the second marked trend in the migration and settlement of peasant refugees. They tended to drift hither and yon, moving from place to place in search of better land.[60] Some of them finally gave up the quest and left these rural parts once and for all, ending up, as so many refugees did, in semi-urban or suburban settings. The findings of the 1956 survey showed that between 1950 and 1956 the proportion of refugees in rural areas dropped from about 60 per cent to about 50 per cent, with 'an appreciable movement, since 1950, of migrants from rural to urban areas'.[61] In 1951, the census commented on the 'sizeable proportion' of refugee agriculturists 'living, strangely enough, in towns', explaining this 'strange' phenomenon as follows: 'the [agriculturist] Displaced Person[s] ... cannot trust [themselves] entirely to a living out of the land but must have a subsidiary non-agricultural occupation as second string'.[62] In 1961, the census commissioner was surprised to see

[59] This, again, was a rather different scenario from the one faced by peasant refugees in the East Punjab and north India. There, the Muslim exodus to Pakistan had freed up almost 2.5 million 'standard acres' of arable land, which was distributed by government amongst peasant refugees: Rai, *Partition of the Punjab*, pp. 121–9. A 'standard acre' was deemed to be a plot of land which was capable of producing 11 or 12 *maunds* of wheat per year: Randhawa, *Out of the ashes*, pp. 81–2.

[60] Over a third of the refugees whom Nakatani studied had moved several times before finally settling in 'Village M': Nakatani, 'Away from home', p. 89.

[61] *Statistical survey 1956*, p. 2. Refugees who worked on the land in West Bengal were more likely to be in 'economic distress' and 'want' than those who settled in the towns. Only 29 per cent of the refugees in rural tracts were deemed to be well off in the same survey, as compared with 39 per cent of those in urban areas.

[62] *1951 Census*, p. 326.

that Krishanagar, Ranaghat and Chakdah – all non-industrial towns in Nadia – had 'grown to enormous proportions by virtue of the influx of displaced persons since 1947'. He described how colony after colony of hard-working refugees had settled along the railway line in Chakdah, cultivating marginal lands along the tracks, transforming what was 'a small village and sleepy hollow' before 1947 into the 'northern fringe of the Calcutta Industrial Region'.[63] Increasingly, peasant refugees moved to towns or to semi-urban tracts in order to supplement their living from the soil with other sorts of work, a trend which turned these refugee settlements into curious hybrid zones where rural and urban lifestyles coexisted in uneasy equilibrium.

And, finally, another category of refugee should also be considered: the very poorest families who had lived by agricultural labour in the east and had to flee in fear of their lives but had literally nowhere to go in the west. It was this hapless segment of the refugee population who ended up in large numbers in government camps.[64] They were often totally destitute when they arrived, with no possessions except the rags they wore. Their number included many single or widowed women who had lost their male kin in the seismic upheavals of partition and found themselves at the head of their dislocated families,[65] as well as the elderly, the disabled and the orphaned. It was these poorest and most vulnerable refugees who were left to languish for years in the government's camps, and who became the most conspicuous victims of a tragically misguided official policy.

The government's rehabilitation policy: denial and dispersal

Refugee migration and settlement in West Bengal thus displayed vivid and striking patterns, crucially shaped by rational survival strategies and by prudent calculations. Refugees went to West Bengal when they concluded it was time to leave, and they chose to go to places where they anticipated they would have the best prospects. They tended to concentrate in particular areas because they believed that there they had the best chance of finding shelter, social support and employment, and because they had connections and skills which they intended to deploy as agents of

63 *1961 Census*, p. 131.
64 By 1954, 60 per cent of the inmates of camps were 'agriculturists': *Report of the committee of ministers, 1954*, p. 3.
65 The large numbers of women in their midst is a common feature of refugee communities the world over, as observed by Susan Forbes Martin, *Refugee women*, London, 1991.

their own rehabilitation. This exercise in judgement and self-reliance was a centrally important feature about these refugees. Yet it was one which the governments of India and West Bengal failed to recognise.

Astonishing though it may seem in retrospect, neither the centre nor the provincial government anticipated that Hindu minorities would leave eastern Bengal in large numbers. When West Bengal's would-be leaders had campaigned for a new state, their plans took no account of the likelihood, and the huge implications, of large diasporas of peoples moving across new borders. For many long years after partition, government failed to recognise that the refugees who flooded in had left the east for sound reasons and were determined not to be sent back. When finally a reluctant Government House recognised that refugees were there to stay, the main thrust of its rehabilitation policy was to 'disperse' refugees from the areas where they had chosen to concentrate and to try and get rid of them, by a mixture of sticks and carrots, to 'empty' tracts, mainly outside West Bengal. These policies flew in the face of the refugees' own perceptions of where they thought they had the best chances of being successfully rehabilitated and went against the grain of their own efforts at assimilation in those parts of the province where they felt they could most easily put down roots. Government policies were shaped by its priorities of promoting social stability and quelling disorder. But they failed to achieve rehabilitation for the refugees, which should have been their central aim. Instead, they succeeded in sparking off resentment and hostility, not only among the refugees themselves but among a public increasingly sympathetic to their plight.

This disastrous official policy was in part the doing of Nehru's government in Delhi. The rehabilitation of refugees was one of the 'temporary and transitional powers' the centre had arrogated to itself under the constitution. In consequence, the government of West Bengal depended on the centre for direction and for resources to guide and support its efforts at providing relief and rehabilitation for the refugees. The centre provided these resources grudgingly and too late, since it was preoccupied with the problem of resettling 7 million refugees fleeing the massacres in the Punjab.[66] For several years, the government of India refused to

[66] From the start, the central government recognised that partition would create a huge transfer of population across the western borders with Pakistan, and it readily took the policy decision that refugees from the west would have to be fully and permanently rehabilitated in India. Property in the East Punjab abandoned by Muslims who fled to Pakistan, the government quickly decided, would be given to the refugees, and this became the cornerstone of its programmes of relocating and rehabilitating them. The official history of the relief and rehabilitation measures for the refugees from West

accept that West Bengal faced a crisis comparable in scale, if not in timing, to the Punjab disaster. Nehru himself remained convinced that conditions in East Bengal did not constitute a grave and permanent danger to its Hindu minorities. He regarded their flight westwards as the product of largely imaginary fears and baseless rumours, not the consequence of palpable threats to Hindu life, limb and property. Long after the exodus from the east had begun, Nehru continued to delude himself that it could be halted, even reversed, provided government in Dacca could somehow be persuaded to deploy 'psychological measures' and restore confidence among the Hindu minorities who were leaving in droves.[67] In April 1948, the two governments signed the Inter-Dominion Agreement in the Canute-like hope of reversing the tide.[68] In 1950, when the violence against minorities in East Bengal was on a scale and of a virulence that could no longer be ignored, Nehru signed 'the Nehru–Liaquat Pact', which was designed to achieve the same aims.[69] Nehru's core purpose – to avoid another exchange of population[70] – was well intentioned. But hanging on to this 'plan' long after it had been shown to be futile prevented the government of India from adopting effective and timely measures to help the refugees of Bengal. New Delhi continued to insist that the rehabilitation of refugees from

Pakistan is set out in Randhawa, *Out of the ashes*; *After partition*; and Bhaskar Rao, *The story of rehabilitation*. A more scholarly assessment is given in Rai, *Partition of the Punjab*, and Kudaisya, 'The demographic upheaval of partition'.

67 Jawaharlal Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 2 December 1949, cited in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 144.

68 The first Inter-Dominion Agreement, signed in April 1948, envisaged setting up Minorities Boards and Evacuee Property Management Boards in East and West Bengal, composed of members of the minority communities. The agreement was intended to reassure Hindus in East Bengal that it was safe for them to stay on there and to persuade Hindu refugees in the west to return home: Proceedings of the Inter-Dominion Conference, Calcutta, 15–18 April 1948, Government of West Bengal, Home (Political) Department Confidential File for the year 1948 (no file number), West Bengal State Archives.

69 According to the pact, the two governments agreed to extend to all nationals of both countries, irrespective of religion, equal rights as citizens, as well as giving them equal opportunities in the civil services and armed forces. They agreed to give facilities to those intending to migrate, and Minority Commissions were to be appointed in East and in West Bengal, chaired in each case by a minister of the provincial government. India and Pakistan also agreed to appoint ministers to their respective central governments, with special responsibilities for 'minority affairs'. See S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 163.

70 In February 1950, a full three years after the exodus began, Nehru wrote to Roy, the premier of West Bengal, 'I agree with you that we can no longer drift and we must come to clear decisions as to the policy to be adopted [but] I think this business of shifting millions of people is beyond our capacity': Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 17 February 1950, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 157.

East Bengal was unnecessary, and indeed positively to be discouraged.[71] It therefore set its face against allowing the property of Muslim evacuees from Bengal to be given to incoming Hindu refugees; rather, its policy remained to hold these evacuated Muslim properties in trust until their rightful owners returned home. Unlike the refugees from the west, moreover, Bengal's refugees were to be given no compensation. Long after the number of refugees in West Bengal had outstripped those in the East Punjab,[72] such funds for their relief and rehabilitation as the central government was persuaded to sanction remained hopelessly inadequate and far too belated to resolve, or even to alleviate on the margins, one of the most intractable problems which partition had created.[73]

For their part, those who ran the government of West Bengal saw the refugees primarily as a threat to their newly established political control: a law-and-order problem which posed dangerous challenges to the fragile stability of post-partition society. Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh's short-lived government admittedly tried to help the refugees by filling all the official vacancies with 'optees' from the east (as they were known), but the charge that he was favouring East Bengalis played a large part in bringing his ministry down.[74] In January 1948, Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy took over the reins of government, and, from the start, he looked at refugees through the prism of politics. He regarded them as cannon fodder which the opponents of his extremely insecure ministry were ready to deploy to embarrass his government.[75] As he explained to Nehru, 'in this province . . . we have . . . refugees coming in a state of mental excitement which enables the careerist politician to get hold of them and utilise them

[71] In a letter to Dr Roy, Nehru revealed where he stood: 'I have been quite certain, right from the beginning, that everything should be done to prevent Hindus in East Bengal from migrating to West Bengal. If that happened on a mass scale it would be a disaster of the first magnitude. Running away is never a solution to a problem . . . To the last I would try to check migration even if there is war': Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 25 August 1948, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 109.

[72] By the end of 1951, refugees in West Bengal were estimated at 2.51 million, while those in the Punjab were only 2.4 million. By the beginning of 1956, the number of refugees in Bengal had grown to about 3.5 million: *Relief and rehabilitation of displaced persons in West Bengal*, printed by the Home (Publicity) Department on behalf of Refugee Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, 1956.

[73] 'The total grant received for this purpose [of relief and rehabilitation] from [central] Government in the two years 1948–49 and 1949–50, [was] a little over 3 crores', working out 'at about Rs. 20/- per capita spread out over two years': Dr B. C. Roy to Nehru, 1 December 1949, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 140.

[74] Dr Ghosh's fall is discussed in chapters 5 and 6 in this book. See also Sen Gupta, *The Congress party in West Bengal*.

[75] The causes of the instability of Dr Roy's government in the later 1940s are discussed in chapters 5 and 6.

for various types of propaganda against the Government and the Congress'.[76] Roy's policy was guided by two main tenets. First, refugees were to be strongly discouraged from coming to West Bengal; to this end they were to be offered as little relief as government could get away with.[77] Secondly, help was to be given to the refugees who arrived despite government's best efforts to keep them out only on the condition that they did precisely as they were told by the state.[78] This meant going where the

[76] Dr B. C. Roy to Nehru, 17 April 1951, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 182.

[77] By various devices, government strove to keep down the numbers of those who were officially deemed to be refugees and therefore eligible for government assistance. A refugee, Calcutta declared, was a person who had migrated before the end of June 1948. To be classified as a refugee, a person had to have been registered as such before January 1949. *Bona fide* 'registered' refugees were entitled to 'relief' but not to rehabilitation. Such little relief as was doled out, even to the few refugees who 'registered' on time, was given on ever more stringent terms. In 1948, the government of West Bengal decided to deny relief to able-bodied males and their dependants who had been at a camp *for more than seven days*. This was part of its drive to shut down the relief camps as soon as it could. In 1950, when the next wave of refugees arrived, the policy of shutting down camps had to be shelved. But, with each successive influx, government acted as if it were the last, setting up 'temporary' camps which time and again it tried to close down as soon as possible. It also kept announcing arbitrary cut-off dates, after which it declared that there would be no more refugees, or at least no more refugees who would be allowed by government to register or be entitled to any relief. In 1952, passports were made mandatory for travel between India and Pakistan in an effort to stem future inflows of refugees. In 1956, the government of India introduced 'migration certificates' to permit entry only to people 'in certain special circumstances such as split families and girls coming into India for marriage'. In December 1957, government decided that no assistance would be given to anyone who migrated after March 1958. Before they were granted migration certificates, those who wanted to get out despite this draconian clause had to sign undertakings that they would not claim any relief or rehabilitation benefits from government. See the *96th Report of India Estimates Committee 1959–60*, Second Lok Sabha, Ministry of Rehabilitation (Eastern Zone), Lok Sabha Secretariat, New Delhi, 1960, p. 4. These harsh provisions remained on the statute books until 1964.

[78] On 15 February 1949, the government of West Bengal laid down that 'such able bodied immigrants as do not accept offers of employment or rehabilitation facilities without justification should be denied gratuitous relief *even if they may be found starving*': Memo No. 800 (14) RR, from the Secretary, Relief and Rehabilitation Department, Government of West Bengal, to all District Officers, dated 15 February 1949 (emphasis added). In July 1949, Calcutta ordered that all relief camps in West Bengal must be closed down by 31 October 1949, within just three months of this astonishingly harsh decree. A little later, the deadline was grudgingly extended by two months until 31 December 1949, 'with a clear direction that rehabilitation of the inmates of the camps be completed by that date and the camps be closed with effect from that date'. This time, the government of West Bengal took pains to make it clear that, while 'there may be cases where refugees may show disinclination to move . . . [t]hat should not be any reason why the closing of camps . . . should be delayed. As soon as lands have been allotted and tents offered and railway warrants issued, refugees are expected to move to their new places of settlement. If they do not, they unnecessarily hold up rehabilitation. It should be made clear to them that by doing so they cannot continue the life of the camp which shall positively be closed': Memo No. 8637 (13) Rehab., from J. K. Sanyal, Assistant Secretary to the Government of West Bengal to all District Officers, dated 9

government directed them to go, which was mainly outside West Bengal, and in particular outside Calcutta.

The essence of government rehabilitation policy was to *disperse* the refugees. As we have seen, they had bunched themselves mainly into three districts and in particular had flooded into Calcutta. The West Bengal government's priority was to dilute these concentrations, to break up these clusters and to resettle as many of the refugees as possible elsewhere in 'empty' tracts as far away from Calcutta as could possibly be contrived, and preferably outside Bengal.

Government saw as its biggest challenge the dispersal of the hundreds of thousands of refugees in Calcutta itself, more of whom continued to pour into the city every day. Dr Roy wanted this refugee tinder to be kept well out of the way of other 'combustible' elements in the city and to spread these people around as thinly as possible and as far away from the metropolis as they could be persuaded or indeed be forced to go. These matters took on an even greater urgency in official eyes after January 1949, when nine people were killed after police used tear gas and batons on refugees at Sealdah Station and students demonstrating on their behalf, and B. C. Roy was forced to call in the army to help the police re-establish a semblance of control over Calcutta.[79] After this scare, his government embarked in earnest on its programme of setting up refugee colonies well away from the city limits,[80] one or two in each surrounding thana.[81] At the same time, it made vigorous efforts to disperse the refugees to camps and colonies situated in the outer western districts of West Bengal, particularly in Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore, where there was still some vacant land for resettlement.

What the government failed to grasp was that, in the crowded conditions of twentieth-century Bengal, any vacant land was not under cultivation for the good reason that it was of pitifully poor quality. Most of the camps were set up in places which did not have adequate irrigation

December 1949. The official line was that refugees had to be made to understand that they should expect no further relief and that they would have to make do with whatever meagre crumbs by way of rehabilitation government decided to offer them. This was the first in a series of official announcements by which it was made unequivocally clear that refugees had no choice in the matter. They had to take what was offered or get nothing at all. These policies are discussed in Joya Chatterji, 'Rights or charity? The debate over relief and rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1947–1950', in Kaul, *Partitions of memory*.

79 S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 113.

80 The city limits were defined by the area administered by the Calcutta Corporation; the larger surrounding urban and semi-urban agglomeration was known as the Calcutta Metropolitan District (or CMD).

81 'Unlike the pre-1950 squatters' colonies [where refugees had settled of their own volition], these colonies were not concentrated in one or two areas', as 'the Government was more interested in dispersing the refugee population throughout the CMD, rather than allowing their concentration at one place': P. Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal', p. 22.

or drainage or which had been shunned by the locals because of their unhealthy malarial climate.[82] Moreover, the refugees from East Bengal had no social connections in these places, and no chance of finding other employment to supplement their exiguous pickings from the land. These were tracts which the refugees themselves had no desire to occupy, gravitating instead to Calcutta and the big towns, where they felt they had the best chance of rebuilding their lives.[83] Yet of the 389 refugee colonies which government set up in West Bengal, not a single one was in Calcutta. Table 3.4 makes the point starkly that hardly any of these camps and colonies were in places where the refugees themselves would have chosen to live, a fact which was to have powerful implications.

From first to last, furthermore, the government of West Bengal took the view that there simply was not enough land in the province to house all the refugees who flooded in. So they had to be 'distributed' in a forced exodus that would scatter these unfortunates throughout the Indian union. In 1948, this policy began with a modest scheme – the brainchild of Dr Roy – to settle a few hundred refugee families across the Black Water of the Bay of Bengal in the Andaman Islands,[84] previously British India's most notorious penal colony. Encouraged by his own ingenuity, Dr Roy then decided to press or cajole other states of India to take in his troublesome refugees and settle them in large camps and colonies, usually in barren or 'jungly' places where the refugees had no wish to go, where the local peoples did not want them, and where the host governments were distinctly unenthusiastic about taking on what they regarded as an unwelcome headache.[85] From the start, these enterprises were doomed

[82] The government's camp at Jirat, for instance, on the west bank of the Hooghly river, had been abandoned by its original inhabitants because of 'the obstruction of drainage caused by the silting up of rivers . . . consequently the village had been devastated by a particular type of malignant malarial fever known at that time as Burdwan fever': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, p. 4.

[83] As the superintendent of the 1961 census noted, the immigrants preferred not to settle in areas where there was 'place available but according to opportunities of employment': *1961 Census*, pp. 346–7.

[84] As Chakrabarty has noted, in 1948 'the idea of settling refugees in the Andamans crossed the mind of the Premier. He sent there a team of 11 officials and non-officials, headed by the Relief and Rehabilitation Minister.' In December 1948, the government of West Bengal put to the prime minister of India its scheme for 'the colonisation of Bengalees in the Andamans': S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 111. See S. Basu-RoyChowdhury, 'Exiled to the Andamans', in P. K. Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal*; and Uditi Sen, 'Settlement of East Pakistani displaced persons in the Andaman islands', unpublished MPhil. seminar paper, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2005.

[85] Their foot-dragging on this front was referred to by Nehru in many of his letters to Dr Roy. As Delhi told Calcutta, 'in spite of our efforts, it is difficult to induce most provinces to absorb more refugees. We have been pressing them to do so for some time': Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 16 August 1948, cited in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 107.

Table 3.4. *Refugees in West Bengal in and outside government camps and colonies, 1958*

Districts	No. of camps and homes	Population in camps and homes	No. of government colonies	Population in government colonies	Refugees outside camps and colonies	Total refugee population
Burdwan	30	43,127	8	6,895	108,481	158,503
Birbhum	17	17,400	6	1,775	4,375	23,550
Bankura	7	11,165	2	50	4,796	16,011
Midnapur	11	16,838	38	4,390	22,654	43,882
Hooghly	11	18,013	38	21,580	65,017	104,610
Howrah	7	7,779	16	7,575	75,781	91,135
24 Parganas	45	43,284	209	105,345	714,161	862,790
Calcutta	7	5,059	—	—	571,555	576,614
Nadia	7	53,160	32	61,640	539,730	664,530
Murshidabad	8	12,709	21	9,945	53,443	76,097
Malda	—	—	12	2,939	69,004	72,924
West Dinajpur	1	989	11	3,865	158,095	162,949
Jalpaiguri	—	—	9	7,850	142,306	150,156
Darjeeling	—	—	2	3,375	26,668	30,043
Cooch Behar	1	1,159	12	6,550	222,118	227,827
Purulia	—	—	—	—	1,332	1,332
TOTAL	152	240,682	389	243,765	2,778,506	3,262,952

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: Relief and Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons in West Bengal (Statement issued by the Government of West Bengal on 15 December 1958), cited in P. Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal. A study of the growth and distribution of refugee settlements within the CMD', Occasional Paper No. 55, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, 1983.

and it is no surprise that they failed. Frogmarched into these inhospitable and wholly unsuitable places on pain of losing any right to assistance, refugees simply ran away and straggled back to Calcutta or the other towns and cities of Bengal where they were branded as ingrates, 'deserters' and criminals. Yet despite the many protests or *satyagrahas* which the so-called camp refugees periodically staged to back their demand to be resettled in West Bengal,[86] the government refused to budge, insisting that there was no land in West Bengal available for the refugees.

For their part, the refugees' leaders counterattacked by undertaking their own surveys of land to see to what they might lay claim for the

[86] For an account of the *satyagraha* of the 'deserters' from Bettiah, see P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 163–77.

purpose of rehousing themselves.[87] They insisted, quite rightly as it turned out, that 'the success of any rehabilitation plan depends to a large extent on the voluntary cooperation of those whom the plan is meant to serve', and that 'any measure based on force or compulsion ... will go to defeat the very purpose itself which the plan aims to achieve'.[88] But the only cultivable land which the immigrants could be given in West Bengal would have had to have been compulsorily acquired by new laws[89] or expropriated by land reforms from the very landed elites on whose political support the government crucially relied. So Dr Roy did not support this scheme. The United Central Refugee Council then raised the stakes by identifying inside West Bengal particular plots of vacant land and publishing a list of these holdings, which added up to more than 20,000 acres and which, the Council insisted, could be shared out among refugees. Most of this land belonged to well-connected people; indeed, one landlord identified by the refugees' survey as having 5,000 acres of 'vacant' land suitable for rehabilitation was none other than West Bengal's minister of fisheries.[90]

After this, government and the refugees moved on to a collision course.[91] The ministry came to see the refugees as political undesirables and hardened its stance. Finally in 1964, when scores of new refugees flooded into West Bengal after the Hazratbal incident, the government decided upon its final tactic: henceforth it would not permit any more refugees to settle in West Bengal and it would offer assistance only to those who agreed to go to designated places outside the province. Of the million or more refugees who arrived in India from East Bengal between 1964 and March 1971,[92] most were packed off to colonies or camps in other provinces, hastily constructed by reclaiming wastelands or forest tracts. A combination of officials from the centre and from Bengal, backed by the Planning Commission, designated 200,000 acres of 'waste' land and forests in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Rajasthan

87 *An alternative proposal for rehabilitation of camp refugees. Memorandum submitted by UCRC to Dr B. C. Roy, Chief Minister, West Bengal, on 11. 8. 58*, United Central Refugee Council pamphlet, Calcutta, 1958 (Bhabani Sen Granthangar o Gabesana Kendra, Calcutta).

88 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

89 For a discussion of the complex law and jurisprudence on the vexed issue of private property in India during this period, see Sarbani Sen, 'The legal regime for refugee relief and rehabilitation in West Bengal, 1946–1958', in P. K. Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal.*

90 This was Hem Chandra Naskar. See the appendix to the UCRC's *Alternative proposal.*

91 See chapters 5 and 6.

92 The 10 million or so refugees who came to India between March and December 1971 as a result of the civil war in East Pakistan and its eventual secession were treated differently. Most were repatriated after Bangladesh gained its independence. See Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, pp. 38–43, and *The state of the world's refugees. Fifty years of humanitarian action,* UNHCR, Oxford, 2000, pp. 60–71.

for this purpose and established thirty-eight refugee colonies in these tracts. According to the central government, by the end of 1971, 44,000 refugee families had been 'rehabilitated', and as many again were 'awaiting rehabilitation' in these remote and unwelcoming parts.[93]

By far the largest, most ambitious and most controversial of these schemes was the Dandakaranya Project. Under the aegis of government agencies specially set up for this purpose, the Dandakaranya Project was given a huge swathe of territory of about 30,000 square miles. The use of these tracts, a barren waste of scrub and forest, was regarded as the expenditure of the expendable by the state governments of Bihar, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh which had title over them. Spread over much of the Koraput and Kalahandi districts of Orissa and Bihar and the Bastar district of Madhya Pradesh, Dandakaranya lay in a low plateau where the soil was arid and infertile and where previously there had been no settled population at all. Its inhabitants were nomads, mainly Gond forest peoples.[94] In these unpropitious surroundings, described with unconscious irony by one official in the propaganda department as a 'forest of breathtaking loveliness', a 'hallowed land . . . where God manifested himself as Rama',[95] the project aimed to resettle East Bengali peasants, in the main from the lowest castes. These were people who had been at the bottom of the pile in East Bengal and who had been thrown entirely on to the mercy of government. Many of them had languished in 'transit camps' since the 1950s. They were now cajoled, browbeaten or forced to go to distant Dandakaranya.[96] To begin with, they were deployed there as labour gangs to build roads and reclaim the unrewarding land for cultivation. Eventually, they were taken to villages for 'permanent resettlement'. By 1973, over 25,000 families had been moved to Dandakaranya and had been 'settled' in 300 new villages.[97]

[93] Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, pp. 21–3.

[94] Gyanesh Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes, fragmented identities. East Bengal refugees and their rehabilitation in India', in D. A. Low and Howard Brasted (eds.), *Freedom, trauma, continuities. Northern India and independence*, New Delhi, 1998, p. 116; Mukherji, 'A cultural ecological appraisal', pp. 101–4; Alok Kumar Ghosh, 'Bengali refugees at Dandakaranya. A tragedy of rehabilitation', in P. K. Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal*, pp. 106–23; and Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, p. 24.

[95] Bhaskar Rao, *The story of rehabilitation*, p. 197.

[96] When Luthra looked at the situation of the 15,400 families settled in 281 villages in Dandakaranya in 1971, 5,400 had been in camps before 1958 and the remaining 10,000 had come in the aftermath of the 1964 riots: Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, p. 25.

[97] Kudaisya states that in Dandakaranya each refugee family was to be given a plot of 6.5 acres to cultivate, and a further half-acre on which to build a house and create a vegetable garden. They were also given loans to buy cattle and to dig wells, and a maintenance grant to tide them over until they brought in their first harvest: Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes', p. 116. Luthra's report, however, shows that each family was given only 4 acres of unirrigated land or 3 acres of irrigated land: Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, p. 25.

This was the West Bengal government's biggest project and much more money than good sense was thrown at it. But it failed, and failed spectacularly. From the first day, refugees sent to Dandakaranya wanted to get out; in the 1970s, they deserted in droves. In 1978 alone, the flood of desertions rose to over 10,000 families.[98] At the time, officials blamed this embarrassing exodus upon inherent defects in character of refugees who had come to Dandakaranya, their 'laziness' and their stubborn resistance to adapting to unfamiliar terrain and to a climate very different from the wetlands of the delta from which they had come.[99] It became convenient to press into use stereotypes of the Bengali refugee which had gained official currency since partition and which depicted them as lacking in all the good characteristics of the 'sturdy' and 'enterprising' peasant refugees from the Punjab.[100]

Official commentators were wont to pin the blame for the project's failure on the 'irrational' and 'sentimental' attachment of the refugees to their motherland back in Bengal.[101] Yet there was no lack of reason or excess of sentiment in refugees' desire to stay in Bengal. The notion that government 'knew best' what was in the interests of the refugees proved to be deeply flawed, and Dandakaranya showed just how unsound it was. In 1964, Saibal Gupta, the chairman of the Dandakaranya Development Authority, blew the whistle on the project in a series of damning articles. He pointed out that less than 10 per cent of the soil which the refugees had been given to farm was in fact arable, even by the most optimistic standards: the rest was simply uncultivable. The authority had failed to provide the irrigation which, in time, might have improved the quality of

98 This wave of desertions was led by those who still hoped they would be welcomed back in Bengal by the Left Front alliance, which had been the champion of refugee causes in the 1950s and 1960s. That alliance had recently returned to office in Calcutta. But this was a false hope. The bloody events at Marichjhapi when returning refugees defied the government by establishing a settlement in a forest reserve in the Sundarbans showed that the policy of the new ministry towards refugees was as stony-hearted as that of its predecessors. See Ross Mallick, 'Refugee resettlement in forest reserves. West Bengal policy reversal and the Marichjhapi massacre', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 58, 1 (February 1999); and Annu Jalais, 'Dwelling on Morichjhanpi. When tigers became "citizens" and refugees "tigerfood"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3 April 2005.

99 Mukherji, 'A cultural ecological appraisal', pp. 103–4.

100 J. Chatterji, 'Rights or charity?' The communist parties of West Bengal were also blamed, with some justification, for encouraging the refugees to resist resettlement in Dandakaranya and to demand instead to be settled in West Bengal.

101 Bhaskar Rao, for instance, took the view that the 'considerable resistance' among the West Bengal camp inmates against being sent to Dandakaranya stemmed from 'prejudice or inertia, or the reluctance to face the hazards of independence in an unfamiliar milieu': Bhaskar Rao, *The story of rehabilitation*, p. 207.

the soil. Most of the plots did not produce enough food to keep the families who farmed them alive. In this bleak and barren terrain, there was no other work by which the refugees could earn a few rupees. Such industries as the authority tried to run, in a hopelessly amateur fashion, were disorganised, unprofitable, mismanaged and usually closed down soon after they were set up. For the brief periods that they were open, they paid their workers scandalously low wages. Nor could the refugees supplement their meagre diets with fish, as had been their wont back in riverine Bengal. Unlike Bengal, with its numerous rivers, ponds, tanks and *bils* where freshwater fish was plentiful, the rocky plateau of Dandakaranya could hardly have been less suitable for the pisciculture the refugees knew so well. There was not enough drinking water, let alone fresh water in which fish could reproduce. Medical facilities were virtually non-existent. Dandakaranya was a place where the hungry, the thirsty, the lame and the sick hopelessly waited for the merciful release of death or tried, with their last twitches of a fading energy, to get up and stumble away.[102]

Another problem the project failed to address was the impact of the refugees upon the aboriginal inhabitants of the plateau. The forests, which were cleared by the forced labour of the refugees, in the past had provided the Gonds with home, habitat and their traditional livelihood. The planners confidently assumed that the march of progress would help 'civilise' and 'improve' the Gonds. They believed these people would be transformed into settled peasants by what was pompously described as the 'demonstration effect': the Bengali refugee agriculturists would 'demonstrate' to the locals how to cultivate the soil. In the event, the osmosis worked in the opposite direction: it was the refugee peasant settlers who learnt a little from the local expertise in shifting cultivation and the sowing practices of the nomads.[103] But, inevitably, relations between the refugee settlers and the Gonds were strained,[104] and this tension was one of the many reasons why the refugees tried to escape back to West Bengal. It is small wonder, then, that the great majority of the refugees who arrived in

[102] Saibal Gupta's observations are summarised in Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes', p. 120. For harrowing accounts of the poverty and starvation in these chronically famine-prone areas, see P. Sainath, *Everybody loves a good drought. Stories from India's poorest villages*, London, 1996.

[103] B. L. Farmer, *Agricultural colonisation in India since independence*, London, 1974, pp. 217–18.

[104] The project also wrecked the way of life of the forest-dwellers, forcing some into crowded settlements and others to leave the area altogether to join India's myriad landless poor in their usually hopeless search for seasonal work: Aijazuddin Ahmed, 'Regional development process and distribution of tribal population in mid-India', in Kosinski and Elahi, *Population redistribution*.

India after 1964, indeed, seven in ten, refused to go to Dandakaranya and places like it. They stayed on in West Bengal despite government blandishments and notwithstanding the fact that government gave them not a *pie* by way of relief or rehabilitation.

Dandakaranya was just the most extreme example of all that was wrong-headed and misguided about the rehabilitation policies of the West Bengal government. In 1954, a Fact Finding Committee was set up by New Delhi to investigate why refugees were forsaking Bengal's government camps and colonies. Observing that refugees 'deserted' these colonies even when they were inside West Bengal, the committee concluded that refugee peasants had been given plots too small to provide even a minimal livelihood. It noted that, while 'the local population [was] able to obtain additional land or crop-share basis or supplement its income by other means, the displaced persons [were] handicapped from supplementing their income on account of *lack of local contacts*'.[105] Observing that the desertions were high in 'Government-sponsored colonies', it concluded that 'some of the sites seem to have been *totally unsuitable for cultivation*'. In contrast, the most successful settlements were private ones, where '*the displaced persons selected places where they felt their chances of rehabilitation were greater*'.[106] As for the middle-class and 'non-agriculturist' refugees whom the government had tried to assist, here too the committee's report showed how inadequate and short-sighted government policies had been. Schemes to encourage horticulture mainly among the lower middle classes in places distant from towns and cities failed for many reasons. 'Many of them [the refugees] were not familiar with vegetable cultivation at all', 'the soil was not suitable, irrigation facilities were lacking'. Despite the fact that 'proximity to the market [was] very important for these colonies', 'many of them were located *at a considerable distance from Calcutta* which [was] by far the most important consuming centre'.[107] To banish educated babus and townsmen to farflung parts of the countryside and try to persuade them to grow fruit and vegetables on poor soil hundreds of miles away from their main markets was hardly a recipe for successful rehabilitation. But the government of West Bengal, keen to avoid the political fall-out of widespread middle-class unemployment among urban refugees, persisted with schemes that were always far-fetched, sometimes utopian and sometimes simply foolish by any measure.

As for the 'urban' camps for town-dwelling refugees set up by the government, the Fact Finding Committee discovered that they were hardly more

[105] *Report of the committee of ministers, 1954*, p. 9 (emphasis added).
[106] *Ibid.* (emphasis added). [107] *Ibid.*, p. 10 (emphasis added).

successful. Where 'township' colonies had been set up far away from existing cities and towns, they too collapsed. The two largest such townships, Taherpur and Gayeshpur, were the flagships of government's dispersal schemes for middle-class refugees. Yet, as the committee dryly observed, in these fledgling towns, 'the scope for finding gainful employment in business or trade [was] extremely limited, and the rehabilitation of dispersed persons settled therein therefore present[ed] a very difficult problem'.

In contrast, the committee concluded that refugees in urban areas, where they had settled of their own accord in the largest numbers, were those that had done best for themselves: 'they are generally well-settled and do not present a problem'. It observed that, where refugees had set up their own colonies which were, in effect, 'adjuncts to the existing large urban towns', they had 'fared much better . . . as they [had] been able to settle themselves by getting gainful employment in factories, commercial firms or offices near these colonies or they [had] started small businesses or industrial establishments on their own. Many of these colonies [were] situated in this vicinity of Calcutta, specially in the Barrackpore division of the 24 Parganas.'[108]

The conclusion was clear for all to see, except for a government determined to keep its eyes closed. *Refugees did best in places where they had settled of their own accord; they did best of all in precisely those tracts from which the government wanted to eject them, whether by force or by blandishment.* In contrast, those who did worst were those who had no choice but to do as government instructed. In the main, these unfortunates failed to reconstruct even a semblance of a life in the out-of-the-way places where government dumped them. Many fled these camps and returned to the cities of West Bengal – and particularly to Calcutta whence they had been ejected – as destitutes and vagrants, or languished hopelessly, year after year, in fetid camps long after they had been officially closed down.[109] Their frustration and despair fuelled the ever-growing cycle of violence that engulfed West Bengal in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The campaigns to get justice for these refugees were merely the visible tip of what came to be described as 'the refugee problem',

[108] *Ibid.*, p. 12. This was also incontrovertibly established by the Anthropology Department's comparison between the government-sponsored colony at Jirat and the privately established squatter colony at Azadgarh: Guha, *Memoir No. 1.*

[109] In September 1961, the camps for 'old migrants' (i.e., those who had arrived in India before 1958) were officially shut down, but 'about 10,000 families continued to live at the camp sites without Government Assistance': *Report of the working group on the residual problem of rehabilitation in West Bengal*, Ministry of Supply and Rehabilitation, Department of Rehabilitation, Government of India Press, March 1976 (henceforth *Report on the residual problem of rehabilitation, 1976*), p. 9.

perhaps the most formidable challenge to the stability of independent West Bengal.

The 'self-settled' refugees

The great majority of the refugees who settled in West Bengal between 1947 and 1970 thus did so largely or solely through their own efforts. But their eventual rehabilitation was the product of an enormous struggle in which refugees mastered new skills and learned be inventive, flexible and tough in the face of adversity. In the battle to adapt and survive, refugees were often pitted against local inhabitants with whom they had to compete for space and for work. They also had to confront government.

The first step in this long and hard journey towards rehabilitation was to find shelter. At first, as has been suggested, many refugees stayed with relatives or friends or found a roof over their heads in camps. But these were temporary devices.[110] Refugee families had to find a place to stay more permanently which would give them some dignity and privacy and was close enough to a town or a city where they could find some work. Such space was, by definition, in short supply and considerably more expensive than land further away from town. Far from assisting the refugees to get the bases they needed, government used their dependence as a lever with which to force them out.

It was this combination of pressures which encouraged many refugees simply to grab any free land they could find and to squat upon it. From 1948 onwards, groups of refugees poured on to unoccupied plots in and around Calcutta and built their shacks upon it. Most of this land was 'in the industrial belt around Calcutta'.[111] Some of it was privately owned and some belonged to the government – or more frequently had been requisitioned by the government from private landlords during the Second World War.[112] Other land captured in this way had belonged to Muslims who had fled from their homes during the riots.[113] By the end of 1950, about 150 such 'squatter colonies' had sprung up, mainly in and

[110] As the working group noted, 'about 75 per cent of the old migrants did not seek admission to camps because they were somehow able to find temporary accommodation with their friends and relations or family members who had come to India earlier': *ibid.*, p. 6.

[111] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

[112] *Report on rehabilitation of displaced persons from East Pakistan squatting on government and requisitioned properties in West Bengal*, Committee of Review of Rehabilitation in West Bengal, Ministry of Labour Employment and Rehabilitation, Government of India Press, May 1970 (henceforth *Report on displaced persons squatting on government and requisitioned properties, 1970*).

[113] See chapter 4.

around Calcutta, spread over several thousand acres.[114] When government attempted to evict the refugees from these colonies by force, this pitted the squatters against the property-owners and the enforcers of their property rights, the dreaded *goondas* and the police of Bengal. The refugees fought back with all their might, meeting – as one observer described it – 'sword with sword'.[115] This confrontation created an acute law-and-order problem which got more serious when, in 1950, the Communists began systematically to take up the cause of the squatters. In 1951, after a sustained and often violent campaign to oust the squatters, the government was forced to concede that it could not forcibly evict them unless it offered them somewhere else to live close to where they worked.[116] In the two decades after 1951, a further 175 illegal squatters' colonies were set up. Four times that number, 700 or more, were established with some semblance of a title to the land on which they were built.[117] The government, paralysed by its fear that when cornered the refugees would fight back, did nothing. It no longer tried to evict the refugees because it had nowhere to send them. Instead, it left refugees where they were, but did nothing to help them improve the conditions of their lives. However, the government could not afford to alienate the powerful landlords on whose properties the refugees had squatted, so it continued to pay out large sums every year in compensation to the legal owners of the land. This state of affairs continued for many years, long after the amount paid out as compensation added up to far more than what it would have cost to resettle the refugees elsewhere or to acquire the land for them.[118] Finally in the mid-1970s the government of West Bengal, urged on by the centre, reluctantly began to 'regularise' these colonies. At long last the squatter colonies of West Bengal had become legitimate features of its urban landscape.

By this time, sprawling refugee settlements had irrevocably transformed the province's geography. Refugees had literally filled up every empty space in and around the big towns, particularly in the great metropolis of Calcutta, occupying every tiny piece of vacant land they could find, whether on pavements or the 'set-asides' along the runways of airfields, in empty houses, on snake-infested marsh and scrubland, and

114 *Report on the residual problem of rehabilitation, 1976*, p. 11.
115 Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, pp. 72–3.
116 *West Bengal Act XVI of 1951. The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation of Land Act. 1951* (as modified up to the 1st April 1962), Law Department, Government of West Bengal, 1962. For a discussion of what lay behind this historic piece of legislation, see P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 33–66; J. Chatterji, 'Rights or charity?'; and Sarbani Sen, 'The legal regime'.
117 *Report on the residual problem of rehabilitation, 1976*, p. 11.
118 *Report on displaced persons squatting on government and requisitioned properties, 1970.*

even on the unsanitary verges of sewers and railway tracks. This consolidated metropolitan Calcutta, previously a cluster of discrete urban settlements, into a single, gigantic and chaotic megalopolis.[119] Other towns in West Bengal also expanded and their topography too was fundamentally altered by similar pressures and processes. In these ever expanding suburbs, refugees eked out a precarious livelihood through a combination of agriculture, trade and casual work in a new amalgam of town and countryside which Bengal had not experienced on anything like this scale before.

Living conditions in these fast-growing and densely inhabited settlements were primitive. Since they had grown in an entirely unplanned way, illegally and without licence from the government, most did not have even the most basic amenities: drains, electricity or running water.[120] Local refugee leaders set up committees of their own to administer these colonies, often on a self-help and co-operative basis, and sometimes with remarkable success.[121] Many of the committee bosses went on to set up their own schools and markets,[122] and some were able to secure illegal connections for electricity.[123] A few colony committees provided, albeit in fairly rudimentary ways, a modicum of clean water, sanitation and other basic facilities.[124] Yet despite these valiant attempts at self-help, refugee settlements in and around greater Calcutta remained, for the most part, desperately squalid. Living conditions in the 'Tollygunge

119 P. Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal', p. 36.

120 *Report on the residual problem of rehabilitation, 1976*, p. 11; *Report on displaced persons squatting on government and requisitioned properties, 1970*, pp. 39–40.

121 Describing Azadgarh, for instance, the anthropologists found that 'during the occupation, [its area] was plotted out and each of the plots measuring from 2.5 to 3 kattas (20 kattas make one bigha) fell to the share of [a] single refugee [family]. They all joined their heads and hands together in setting up a self-sufficient colony by making pathways, levelling the uneven agricultural land and at certain places removing jungles infested with jackals and snakes ... For the systematic administration of the area, a central committee was formed with three ward committees ... The President, Secretary and Members of each Ward Committee were elected by vote by the inhabitants of that particular ward. The function of the Ward Committees was to sink tubewells, construct new pathways and also do relief work. The central committee [was responsible] for running schools, conducting legal cases, looking after the sanitation of the colony and doing general relief work': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, pp. 51–2.

122 For a description of how refugees set up a market in Bijoygarh Bazar, see Dipankar Sinha, 'Foundation of a refugee market. A study in self-reliance initiative', in P. K. Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal*.

123 Asok Sen, 'Life and labour in a squatters' colony', Occasional Paper No. 138, Centre for Studies in the Social Sciences Occasional Paper, Calcutta, 1992.

124 At the Manohar colony in Dumdum, as a refugee family arrived it had to register itself with the committee and pay a fee of ten rupees. The family would then be allotted a plot on which to build a hut. The committee superintended the building of huts and managed other day-to-day activities in the colony. In the other squatter colonies, similar committees ran schools and set up co-operatives for weavers, carpenters and other craftsmen: Kudaisya, 'Divided landscapes', p. 114.

Railway Colony' on railway lands between Ballygunje and Kalighat, and between Jadavpur and Dhakuria, where some 2,000 families had settled in the late 1950s, were appalling. Even the government's own Review Committee, hardened though it was by what it had seen in and around Bengal, described them as 'sub-human'.[125] It is this unplanned, unassisted and unregulated growth of overcrowded refugee colonies which has cemented Calcutta's reputation as 'a cliché of hell', a city of 'multitude, misery, dilapidation [and] violence'.[126]

Yet despite the brutal conditions in the squatter colonies, the refugees did not want to leave them. When, some twenty or thirty years later, the government finally got round to attempting to resettle them in an effort, once and for all, to solve what it was pleased to call 'the residual problem of rehabilitation in West Bengal', the refugees made it clear they preferred to stay where they were. As the committee noted, this was because refugees had by this time succeeded in finding 'a means of livelihood in the neighbourhood':[127] 'the families during these years [had] attained some economic and social adjustment with the local conditions. They [were] earning their livelihood, precarious though it may [have been], by different avocations in the locality.'[128]

These awkward sentences touch upon an important theme in the story of the Bengal refugees. Government surveys in the 1950s and 1960s showed that the refugees who had settled through their own efforts in West Bengal in these harrowingly unpromising conditions nonetheless managed to achieve impressively high rates of employment. Having somehow acquired a little space in which to live, however small or primitive these plots happened to be, the refugees strove hard to enter the job market. They struggled to acquire new educational qualifications and skills which would improve their chances of getting paid work. Refugees became literate at a much faster rate than did members of the host community. By the time of the 1951 census, almost half the refugee population could read and write. This was already twice as high as the literacy rate of the host population, where not even one person in four had learnt the three Rs. By 1956, the proportion of literates among the refugees had risen again by more than 25 per cent (see table 3.5). Refugees took the business of acquiring skills, particularly reading and writing, extremely seriously, hoping that these skills would give them an

125 *Report on displaced persons squatting on government and requisitioned properties, 1970*, p. 43.
126 Jean Racine (ed.), *Calcutta 1981. The city, its crisis and the debate on urban planning and development*, New Delhi, 1990, p. 1. See also John Hutnyk, *The rumour of Calcutta. Tourism, charity and the poverty of representation*, London, 1996.
127 *Report on displaced persons squatting on government and requisitioned properties, 1970*, p. 39.
128 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Table 3.5. *Literacy among refugees and the host population in West Bengal, 1950–1955 (percentages)*

	Migrants only (1950 survey)	Persons excluding migrants (1951 census)	Members of migrant families (1955 survey)
Male	68.6	36.3	78.3
Female	17.9	7.9	29.2
TOTAL	41.8	22.7	52.9

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: Rehabilitation of refugees. A statistical survey (1955), State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Alipore, 1956, p. 3.

edge in the highly competitive marketplace for employment in West Bengal.[129]

Particularly significant was the rapid growth of literacy among refugee women. Already by 1950, four times as many women refugees were literate as women in the host population.[130] In the five years that followed, refugee girls and women achieved a staggering increase of 60 per cent in their rates of literacy (see table 3.5). It seems that cruel circumstance encouraged refugee families to espouse relatively progressive attitudes towards the education of women. Refugees lived, as has been seen, near towns and cities where employment was scarce and wages were historically low, driven down by a decades-long glut in the supply of single male migrants in the labour market. In consequence the pay most breadwinners traditionally earned in the mills and factories of West Bengal was usually just enough to support a single male who had no dependants. Refugees had families to support, sometimes nuclear but often extended, which could not live on the earnings of a single breadwinner. Even better-off refugee families of middle-class origin could not afford the luxury of keeping women unemployed at home. So refugee women had to go out to work, and their families hoped that by teaching them to read and write, they would find 'safe' and 'decent' work outside the home.[131] In any event, education was a badge of respectability, an

129 *Statistical survey, 1956*, p. 3.
130 Although the authors of the 1956 survey believed that the female refugees already had relatively higher standards of literacy before they emigrated, this is not borne out by the detailed anthropological survey of 1951, which showed that only 4 per cent of the women at Jirat (recently arrived from Pakistan) were literate: Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, p. 22.
131 See the interview with Bithi Chakravarti in J. Bagchi and S. Dasgupta (eds.), *The trauma and the triumph. Gender and partition in eastern India*, Calcutta, 2003, pp. 150–8.

Table 3.6. *Occupational distribution of refugee families, 1956*

Occupation	Thousand families		
	Urban	Rural	Total
Nil	9.8	8.5	18.3
Agriculture	5.4	141.1	146.5
Small industry	19.1	20.1	39.2
Trade	53.9	32.2	86.1
Hereditary profession	5.5	14.0	19.5
Learned profession	16.0	11.9	27.9
Government service	44.1	16.2	60.3
Other services (excluding domestic)	50.9	16.4	67.3
Domestic services	2.6	2.8	5.4
Skilled labour	9.4	4.2	13.6
Unskilled labour	5.3	9.3	14.6
Other occupations	9.5	6.4	15.9
TOTAL	231.5	283.1	514.6

This table excludes single-member households. The table is based on the occupation which was the main source of income of the family concerned.
Source: Rehabilitation of refugees. A statistical survey (1955), State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Alipore, 1956, p. 4.

indication that the refugees were clinging to their genteel values even if circumstances had robbed them of the wherewithal to maintain their old *bhadra* (genteel) ways in which women were not wont to venture outside the inner cloisters of their homes.[132] Whatever the complex mix of reasons which drove forward this trend towards greater female literacy, many more refugee girls were now receiving an education. They were thrown into a job market where they competed with some success for sought-after 'respectable' jobs such as clerks, tellers and schoolteachers.

Their investment in education paid dividends. Refugees did indeed find jobs in 'respectable' service and service-related sectors. Table 3.6 shows that twice as many refugee workers found employment in these sought-after sectors as compared with the host population. Remarkably, of those who entered the labour market for the first time (i.e., those who had not

[132] Recalling his childhood in the refugee colony at Netaji Nagar, Manas Ray speaks of the overpowering 'press for *shiksha* [knowledge] . . . The locality in the late evenings would take on the proportions of a factory, the *shiksha* factory . . . Shiksha would help us win recognition from Calcutta or our bhadralok status': 'Growing up refugee. On memory and locality', in P. K. Bose, *Refugees in West Bengal*.

worked when they were in East Bengal), more than one in three found jobs in government or in private service. This shows beyond a doubt that educated refugees competed vigorously and effectively against the locals for precisely the jobs which were most coveted by all bhadralok Bengalis.[133] They also vied successfully for jobs in all the better-paid sectors of the economy. About 45 per cent of refugees who entered the labour market for the first time got jobs as skilled labour, which were relatively well paid and sought after. And notwithstanding the stereotype of Bengali incapacity and distaste for enterprise, a substantial proportion of the refugees went into trade and commerce. Usually beginning by setting up as petty hawkers or stall-keepers or by finding a role for themselves on the bottom rungs of the wholesale or retail trades (see table 3.6), in many cases they quickly climbed these ladders and achieved a measure of commercial success.

All of this suggests that refugees were determined to better themselves and were not ready to settle for just any job. Already in 1951, the census superintendent remarked upon how refugees tended to be concentrated in certain sectors of the economy, which, for his part, he found 'unsatisfactory':

> There is decidedly too much [concentration] in . . . commerce – petty trade and shopkeeping in every zone and in every area, rural and urban [–] than can be good for a population which has not yet found its roots in the soil of its adoption, and whom the hazards of the wholesale and retail trade might send spinning any day. But even more disconcerting is the concentration of the displaced population in every zone and area, rural as well as urban, in . . . 'other services'.[134]

By 1956, refugee employment revealed a clear pattern. Refugees plumped for the better-paid jobs. They preferred to work in those sectors of the economy – such as government or private service, petty trade, commerce and small industries – which offered decent returns but required little investment by way of capital or assets (see table 3.7). The Statistical Survey showed that one in three of all refugees was fully employed, achieving a higher rate of employment than the host population, with all its inherent advantages, had managed to get.[135] Of the 514,000 refugee families in urban and rural areas studied by the

[133] In 1953, the State Statistical Bureau advertised vacancies for a few posts of temporary assistant investigators; it had almost 7,000 applicants, of whom just under half were refugees, for a handful of jobs. Of these refugee applicants, eight in ten were educated at least up to matriculation standard: *Sidelights of unemployment*, State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1957.

[134] *1951 Census*, p. 326.

[135] Even more remarkable is the fact that, by 1956, of the 730,000 refugees who had found jobs in West Bengal, 170,000 were in work for the first time: *Statistical survey, 1956*, p. 9. Even making allowance for children reaching employable age, the number of 'first-time' refugee employees was still about 110,000. Refugees found employment at a

Table 3.7. *Occupation of refugees as compared to the general population and 'economic migrants', 1961*

Total persons (10,000s)	General population	Immigrants from other parts of India	Refugees
Cultivation	1,227	278	925
Agricultural labour	507	245	254
Mining, quarrying, livestock, fishing, hunting and plantations, orchards etc.	165	723	91
Household industry	140	88	201
Manufacturing other than household industry	378	1,859	613
Construction	43	187	63
Trade and commerce	250	927	565
Transport, storage and communication	112	562	223
Other services	444	1,308	860
Non-workers	6,684	3,823	6,205

Distribution of occupations of 10,000 persons by industrial category
Source: Census of India 1961, vol. XVI, part I-A, book (i), p. 371.

survey, only 3 per cent, quite remarkably, had no jobs whatsoever. By 1956, as many as 83 per cent of all refugees in the workforce found gainful employment, however insufficient their earnings might have been to meet all the needs of the family as a whole.[136]

This repudiates the stereotype of the refugee – and particularly the Bengali refugee – as a passive victim, a mere supplicant who was a burden on society. Most refugees responded positively to the challenges of their situation instead of waiting hopelessly for handouts from government. They were dynamic and worked hard to make good. Many of them proved to be exceptionally enterprising, determined and aggressively competitive in their reactions, characteristics believed to be typical of economic migrants, but not of refugee communities.[137]

significantly higher rate than the host population. In this, refugees tended to resemble economic migrants, who, the statistics suggest, entered the job market at almost twice the rate of the host population.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

137 This has also been demonstrated in Nilanjana Chatterjee, 'The East Bengal refugees. A lesson in survival', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta. The living city*, vol. II, New Delhi, 1990; and N. Chatterjee, 'Midnight's unwanted children. East Bengal refugees and the politics of rehabilitation', Brown University, doctoral dissertation, 1992.

These facts reflect some quite remarkable achievements. But they should not be taken to suggest that, by dint of hard work and enterprise, the 'self-settled' refugees of West Bengal were able rapidly and successfully to reconstruct their lives in their new homeland. For most of them, sadly, this was far from being the case. Despite these impressive statistics, many 'self-settled' refugees failed to escape grinding poverty. Most of those who lived in the sprawling slums or in pavement shanties did find some work, but they were usually paid too little to enable them to escape penury. All too frequently they had no choice – men, women and children alike – but to accept grossly underpaid work which offered not even the limited protection of the organised sectors. Most drifted from one casual job to another, sometimes part-time and always poorly paid, in the informal sectors of the economy which now grew, unregulated, by leaps and bounds. Only the fortunate few among the women were able to get so-called respectable jobs as teachers or clerks. Most had to find work as domestic servants or *jhis* in well-to-do households, where they washed, cleaned and cooked for pitifully small wages. Others became 'piece-workers' in the notorious informal sector of the clothing industry, sewing cheap garments for a pittance, working long hours in poorly lit homes or crowded sweat-shops, leaving their young with only slightly older girl children who should by rights have been at school or at play. These girls helped their mothers with household chores, while their brothers laboured all day in roadside tea shops and food stalls in return for a few scraps of food.[138]

'Middle-class' refugees who found better-paid work in the service and professional sectors did not always escape the long arm of misery either. The 1956 survey found much impoverishment, even in refugee households where the main breadwinner earned what was deemed to be a 'decent' salary, in other words the modest sum of Rs 100 or more a month. The reason for this was that refugee families tended to be significantly larger than the average; they also grew in size faster. Refugees, it will be recalled, migrated as whole families and they contained many women of a child-bearing age. Indeed, so many refugee women came into Calcutta after 1947 that their influx significantly altered the ratio between the sexes in the capital, formerly a city predominantly of single males, in favour of women. One inevitable consequence of more women in wedlock living permanently with their husbands in the city was a population explosion wherever refugees tended to cluster. In the

[138] This description is based on the study by N. Banerjee of *Women workers in the unorganised sector*.

Table 3.8. *Poverty and family size among urban and rural refugees, 1956*

Income group (Rupees per month)	Distressed families (average family size)	Families in want (average family size)	Other refugee families (average family size)
URBAN			
Rs 1–50	4.3	3.4	3.0
Rs 51–100	5.6	4.9	3.8
Above Rs 100	8.7	7.7	6.7
RURAL			
Rs 1–50	4.1	3.4	2.8
Rs 51–100	6.4	5.3	4.4
Above Rs 100	7.7	8.0	6.8

Source: Rehabilitation of refugees. A statistical survey (1955), State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Alipore, 1956, p. 18.

quinquennium between 1951 and 1956, the birth-rate among refugees grew at a rate 60 per cent faster than that of the host population. As refugee families grew larger, so also did their levels of 'distress' and of 'want' in every social class (see table 3.8).[139] Larger families placed greater burdens on already strained domestic budgets, pushing most refugee households below the poverty line. By 1956, two in three refugee households were deemed to be living in conditions of 'want' or 'distress'.

It was not only in the overcrowded shanty towns that refugees suffered privation. The 1956 survey found even more impoverishment among refugees in the countryside than in the towns: seven in ten refugees who had settled in rural parts were also in 'distress' or 'want', whereas only six in ten in the cities were classified as suffering similar levels of hardship.[140] Given that refugees in rural areas for the most part found little land and what they got was of such low quality that it could not feed them and their families, this was hardly surprising.

Thus, while the record of 'self-settled' refugees is impressive, most of them nonetheless led extremely hard lives and suffered great privation. Living together in densely crowded squats or settlements or in rural slums, the refugees from East Bengal had a language, culture and religion in common with their hosts. Despite this, they were not 'assimilated' or 'rehabilitated' in West Bengal in any meaningful way, and for decades after they arrived in India they remained on the margins of society.

[139] *Statistical survey, 1956*, p. 18. [140] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

The impact of the refugee exodus on West Bengal: migration and social change

By 1973, almost 15 per cent of West Bengal's entire population, and one in four of those who lived in its towns,[141] were refugees. Even though most tried to get by without looking to the government for help, their settlement had profound consequences for the new province.

The brunt of these difficulties was, of course, borne by the refugees themselves. In this new setting, their lifestyles underwent very significant changes. They had wrenched themselves out of the complex social webs in eastern Bengal to which they had been attached and, as Pakrasi has shown, they clung to their old values and tried to recreate traditional ways of life in West Bengal.[142] But in reality they had no choice but to adapt and to change.

Migration had complex effects on social relations within refugee communities. At one level, the bonds of caste and kinship among refugees were strengthened, since these ties were a key resource in enabling them to pitch their tents in new encampments in West Bengal[143] – family, kin and caste associates provided shelter to many of them when they first arrived and then helped them on their way.[144] Yet at another level, living cheek by jowl in crowded camps and colonies rubbed away some of their most rigid attitudes in regard to caste purity and pollution.[145] Many of the refugees had to take up paid employment for the first time, as we have seen, taking jobs they would not have dreamt of touching back

141 By 1973, according to official figures, out of a total of 44 million people in West Bengal, 6 million were refugees: P. Chaudhuri, 'Refugees in West Bengal', Table 1.

142 Pakrasi, *The uprooted*.

143 Nakatani has shown how Namasudra refugees clung to (and along the way reconstructed) a discrete 'Namasudra' identity in their new homes in Nadia, distinguishing themselves from locals (and indeed from other refugees), whom they referred to as *sthaniya lok* ('local people'). They did this by performing their own *nam-kirtan* ceremonies (*nam-kirtan* is a religious ceremony involving the repeated recitation of the names of gods, accompanied by music): Nakatani, 'Away from home', p. 101. See also Gautam Ghosh, 'God is a refugee. Nationality, morality and history in the partition of India', *Social Analysis*, 42, 1 (1998).

144 As Guhathakurta's family histories show, partition brought about a sea-change in the way the term *atmiya-swajan* (or kinsfolk) was used, and the boundaries of *atmiyata* (relatedness) were continuously pushed back as refugees used these relationships in their struggle to survive: Meghna Guhathakurta, 'Families uprooted and divided. The case of the Bengal partition', unpublished paper presented at a workshop on 'Alternative Histories and Non-written Sources. New Perspectives from the South', La Paz, May 1999, p. 175.

145 The anthropological survey of refugee attitudes conducted by the government in 1951 showed unequivocally that all refugees had more relaxed attitudes towards members of other castes: almost 80 per cent of the sample at Azadgarh showed no tension or unfavourable attitudes to members of other castes (p. 70), 85 per cent of all males

home;[146] others had to take up new occupations which were significantly lower in status than those they used to have. In turn, this affected their social standing, since for caste Hindus, status and occupation were intricately intertwined. Shifting from east to west was a passage which eroded some of the traditional links between status, caste and occupation, and thus began the long process by which caste status and social identity began subtly to change in West Bengal. In their turn, these changes had an unsettling effect on refugees, making them anxious and alienated long after they had achieved a measure of economic security in their new homeland.

The structure of family life among refugee communities also changed profoundly. When he looked at the peasant refugees of East Bengal, Kanti Pakrasi described how they struggled to preserve family life as they had known it in eastern Bengal, keeping intact as far as possible patrilineal, patrilocal, extended families. But already by 1948 the balance of influence inside refugee households had begun to alter. Within a year of partition, the scarcity of physical space for most refugees undermined the large Hindu joint families which had been the norm in eastern Bengal, and nuclear families now increasingly tended to hive off from them.[147] Of course, circumstances altered cases. High-caste families generally found it easier to keep the old extended families going,[148] while lower castes found it more difficult. But the upshot was that the number of nuclear refugee families continued to grow apace.[149] So too did the number of men and women, mainly from humble backgrounds, who lived as single persons outside any family structure whatsoever. These were new and destabilising developments in Bengal, given the critically important role that families traditionally played in regulating behaviour in Hindu society.[150]

favoured friendships with members of all castes, 77 per cent of males reported a willingness to dine with other castes and, in general, 'caste prejudice show[ed] a gradual decline': Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, pp. 70–7.

146 By 1956, 222,700 migrants who had never had paid employment in Pakistan had jobs in West Bengal. Of these, 171,200 had not worked in Pakistan because they had neither needed nor been expected to work. About 35,000 of them were women: *Statistical survey, 1956*, p. 9.

147 Pakrasi observed that 'elementary (simple) families consisting of parents/parent with unmarried children dominated relatively more among the refugee-migrants than among the non-migrant local Hindus of undivided Bengal', which, he argues, 'indicates strongly that the displaced persons suffered unavoidable disintegrations in their joint families under the calamitous dislocations from homes of regular residence in East Bengal': Pakrasi, *The uprooted*, p. 69.

148 *Ibid.*, p. 89.

149 Some of the poorest refugees who ended up in camps sometimes deliberately broke up into two or more families in order to claim extra plots or loans from the government: Guha, *Memoir No. 1*, p. 6.

150 One of the most interesting revelations of the Anthropology Department's study of social tensions among the refugees was the high degree of tension and conflict it found to be the norm inside refugee families: *ibid.*

But perhaps the most significant change wrought in the family life of refugees was in the position of women. As has been shown, many refugee families sought shelter with their matrilineal and 'affinal' relatives, altering age-old patterns of patrilineal and patrilocal relationships and challenging deeply held taboos about the role of women. In consequence, the status and influence of women underwent changes. As mothers, wives, sisters or mothers-in-law, they often became a key 'link' in the chain of migration and in the process by which displaced kin sought to rehabilitate themselves. Difficult though it is to quantify these subtle shifts, it would be unsafe for social historians to ignore their growing impact. As refugee women rapidly became more literate and as more of them joined the ranks of the employed, the working *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) was a new and important phenomenon in urban West Bengal.[151] So too was the huge growth in the number of poorer women employed in domestic service and in the informal sectors of Bengal's economy.

Displacement, of course, was not automatically the harbinger of progress, still less of the emancipation or 'empowerment' of refugee women in some simple or linear progression. Working women tended to have little control over the wages they earned. Despite the growing contribution their salaries made to the family's domestic economy, their control over their own lives was by no means securely established just because they had become wage-earners.[152] Yet some refugee women did begin to achieve a measure of freedom and opportunity by joining the paid workforce or by gaining an education. These developments caused significant shifts in the social mores of caste Hindus.[153] 'Decent'

[151] See also Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Women in Calcutta. After independence', in S. Chaudhuri, *Calcutta*, vol. II. The character Khukhi in Ritwik Ghatak's 1960 film *Meghe dhaka tara* ('The cloud-covered star'), who braves the world in her broken sandals to find work to support her family, is perhaps the most iconic representation of this phenomenon.

[152] See N. Banerjee, *Women workers in the unorganised sector*.

[153] In 1971 and 1972 a study of refugee families found that 62 per cent of the couples in the survey lived in nuclear families, 48 per cent preferred 'courtship' (rather than negotiated marriages) 'as a prelude to a happy family' and 33 per cent favoured inter-caste and inter-community marriages. Commenting on these remarkable statistics, the authors suggested that the 'greater advocacy for courtship and the growing interest [in] inter-caste/inter-community marriage are the evidence of a definite shifting to a new thought which is, perhaps, prompted by the absence of rigid old social barriers they had been subjected to in the places of their origin as well as the influence of the cosmopolitan atmosphere they have come into contact [with] since partition, while leading a camp life at different places and negotiating with kith and kin living in towns or cities': S. L. De and A. K. Bhattacharjee, 'Social consciousness and fertility patterns of the refugee settlers in the Sundarbans', National Library, Calcutta, c. 1974.

women, traditionally tucked away in the *antahpur*[154] (the Hindu equivalent of the *zenana*), now went out and about in the big world, bringing irreversible changes in Hindu middle-class notions of female propriety and respectability.

The impact of these changes was not confined only to the camps and colonies where the refugees clustered. Society in West Bengal as a whole was profoundly affected by absorbing millions of displaced people. The dramatic explosion in the province's population, particularly in the towns and cities, was the most obvious consequence. As the census superintendent observed in 1951, 'the effect of this influx, amounting to fifty years' normal [population] growth of the state packed into five years, [had] been one of painful swarming; in certain areas it had increased the density per square mile by several thousands, in others by several hundreds and over West Bengal as a whole by 68'.[155] The impact was greatest in those areas where refugees clustered, in Calcutta itself, the 24 Parganas and Nadia, where refugees took over all the empty space in and around the big towns. Calcutta, as we have seen, was welded together into a single, gigantic metropolis, surrounded by vast, sprawling suburbs. Nadia, too, was similarly transformed. Before partition, the population of Nadia had been in decline, yet by 1951 it had witnessed the most rapid growth in population of any district in West Bengal, 'entirely due to the influx of the displaced population'.[156] Its formerly small and sleepy townships such as Ranaghat, Chakdah and Nabadwip witnessed a growth in population which was little short of spectacular. By 1961, Nabadwip's population had achieved a staggeringly high density of 16,000 people per square mile.[157] In the 24 Parganas, the thanas of Basirhat, Habra, Barasat, Baruipur and Hasnabad all 'witnessed a phenomenal growth after the partition of 1947'.[158] By 1961, the 24 Parganas had a population of over 6.2 million and had become the most populous district in the whole of India. Most towns and cities of West Bengal grew by leaps and bounds. By 1961, West Bengal had four times as many towns with a population over 100,000 than it had had in 1941. During the same two decades, the number of towns with between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants virtually doubled (see table 3.9). This rapid, unplanned and

[154] On the seclusion of high-status women in colonial Bengal and life in the *antahpur*, see Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from within. Early personal narratives of Bengali women*, Delhi, 1991; and Tanika Sarkar, *Words to win. The making of Amar Jiban: A modern autobiography*, New Delhi, 1999. On the changing role of women in the Bengal workplace, see Samita Sen, *Women and labour in late colonial India. The Bengal jute industry*, Cambridge, 1999.

[155] *1951 Census*, p. 136.

[156] The district's population grew by 36.3 per cent in a single decade: *ibid.*, p. 139.

[157] *1961 Census*, p. 131. [158] *Ibid.*

Table 3.9. *Number of towns in each class, West Bengal 1901–1961*

Class of town (and population)	1961	1951	1941	1931	1921	1911	1901
I (100,000 or above)	12	7	3	2	2	2	2
II (50,000 to 99,999)	19	14	10	2	4	2	—
III (20,000 to 49,999)	46	29	30	23	25	21	16
IV (10,000 to 19,999)	45	41	27	27	21	25	29
V (5,000 to 9,999)	50	18	25	26	29	22	21
VI (Less than 5,000)	12	11	10	14	8	9	10
TOTAL	184	120	105	94	89	81	78

Source: Census of India 1961, vol. XVI, part I-A, book (i), p. 175.

unprecedented explosion in the rate of Bengal's urbanisation was caused, in the main, by the influx of refugees.

This huge increase in West Bengal's urban population after partition was not simply the direct result of 'adding on' the 5 or 6 million Hindus who came from East Bengal. The refugee influx caused the population of the province to increase geometrically. It caused the number of females in West Bengal to rise dramatically in the ten years from 1941 to 1951, reversing the decline of the previous forty years.[159] This change was particularly remarkable in the towns and cities of West Bengal, and nowhere more so than in Calcutta. In 1901, there had been only 518 females for every 1,000 males in Calcutta, and by 1941 this number had fallen still further to a paltry 456, less than one woman to every two men. But in the decade that followed, the ratio of women in Calcutta had risen to 580 for every 1,000 men. By 1961, it had reached the unprecedentedly high figure of 612 women to every 1,000 men.[160] And, of course, as the numbers of women and adolescent girls in urban West Bengal grew, particularly in circumstances where most women had little control over their reproductive capacities,[161] the birth-rate went up. In 1947, West Bengal's population was estimated at just over 20 million. By 1961, it had grown to almost 35 million. During the decade from 1951 to 1961, India's population as a whole increased by 21.5 per cent. That of West Bengal grew considerably faster, by almost 33 per cent in the same period.[162]

This extraordinary demographic surge created enormous problems for Bengali society, not least because no one, neither the government and certainly not the politicians, had anticipated it. West Bengal having been

[159] *Ibid.*, p. 237. [160] *Ibid.*, p. 235.
[161] N. Banerjee, *Women workers in the unorganised sector.* [162] *1961 Census*, p. 99.

caught entirely off guard, its demographic projections and the five-year plans based upon these insecure estimates proved to be wildly off the mark.[163] A province already 'overcrowded' in 1947, by 1961 West Bengal had more than 1,000 people per square mile, its capital Calcutta winning the unenviable distinction of being the most densely populated place on earth. With this came all the unbearable pressures on scarce resources that densities of this order of magnitude entailed. By 1961, no less than a quarter of West Bengal's population, that is, almost 9 million people, lived in towns or cities. Two in every three of these urban dwellers were in Calcutta and its immediate environs.[164] This had the inevitable consequences of huge increases in the demand for property and sharp and politically dangerous rises in house and land prices and in rents.

Another profoundly destabilising factor was the scarcity of food in the new province. Even before partition, rice, the main staple in Bengal, had been in seriously short supply. Partition stripped West Bengal of its most fertile paddy fields, and by July 1950 West Bengal faced an annual 'food gap' of 200,000 tons of food grains,[165] with the result that the price of rice and other essential foods began to spiral out of control. Each year this 'food gap' grew wider as West Bengal's population continued to grow larger. This caused food prices to shoot upwards, seriously undermining the little stability the society and polity of West Bengal had managed to retain.

These shortages, whether of food, land or cloth, exacerbated already acute inflationary trends in prices. As one observer noted, the 'social overload' and 'the needs of the refugees let loose an inflationary spiral resulting in a sharp rise in general prices of commodities, land and materials. In a period of 5–7 years, the price of land and other commodities shot up by five times [*sic*].'[166] Indeed, as another observer commented, 'the partition of the country helped, [by keeping] markets steady', to prolong the boom in trade and commerce which had begun during the Second World War.[167] The record levels of inflation after 1947 undoubtedly profited 'a really big class of the new rich', but it caused enormous hardship to the poor. In 1946, a survey of Calcutta's living conditions had already shown 'evidence of a chronic protein and fat hunger in the lower incomes'.[168] But now the salaried middle classes were also being squeezed and they found themselves chronically undernourished.

[163] The Third Five-Year Plan estimated that West Bengal's population would be 29.69 million in 1961; 32.40 million in 1966; and 34.73 million in 1971. In fact, by 1961 it had already reached 34.93 million: *ibid.*, p. 86.
[164] *Ibid.*, p. 188. [165] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 172.
[166] Luthra, *Rehabilitation*, p. 6. [167] *1951 Census*, pp. 118–19. [168] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Household budgets of all income groups came under severe pressure.[169] By 1951, most urban middle classes in Bengal were feeling the sharp pinch of want since salaries had failed to keep up with 'the cost of living index since 1947–48'.[170]

As the population of West Bengal exploded, so did the size of its workforce. This made the competition for every job fiercer, particularly in the services and in the skilled labour market where so many refugees sought jobs. Unemployment and the equally insidious problem of under-employment became ever more intractable.[171] A survey of Calcutta in 1964 by Nirmal Kumar Bose showed that educated refugees had competed so successfully for jobs in Calcutta that the local educated bhadralok found themselves being driven out of their traditional positions in the services and being forced to look for work in sectors which they had previously shunned.[172] As for the refugees, so too for the local Bengalis: these changes in their old patterns of life caused deep tensions and anxieties.[173] Student unrest and militant action by young men on the streets of Calcutta in the 1950s and 1960s were symptoms of the rapid transformations which a ballooning population and an expanding workforce brought to the shattered economy of Bengal.

In its turn, as the supply of labour in West Bengal hugely outstripped demand in the state's declining industrial economy, the informal sectors expanded at an unprecedented rate.[174] As employers in the formal sectors, whose businesses had been damaged by the aftershocks of partition, cut back and laid off their regular workers,[175] production in West Bengal

[169] *Ibid.*, p. 122. [170] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[171] *Survey of unemployment in West Bengal, 1953 (first interim report)*, vol. I, part I, State Statistical Bureau, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1953; *A note on the indices of employment and unemployment in Calcutta and Calcutta industrial areas, 1962, with base 1959*, Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistics, Government of West Bengal, Alipore, 1970.

[172] Nirmal Bose in 1964 discovered a 'serious rearrangement' among those previously employed in the professions and those who depended on landed wealth. At least in part because of 'the extraordinary influx of Hindu refugees', 'upper-caste Hindus [local to Calcutta were] consequently joining the industries in one capacity or another', such as those connected with engineering, pharmaceuticals or rubber works, or 'resorting to trade for a livelihood', 'although they would have hesitated to do so two generations ago': Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta: 1964. A social survey* (Anthropological Survey of India), Bombay, New Delhi, Calcutta and Madras, 1968, p. 32.

[173] These tensions were powerfully depicted in Satyajit Ray's 'Calcutta trilogy' films of the 1970s: *Pratidwandi* ('The adversary'), *Seemabaddha* ('Company Limited') and *Jana Aranya* ('The middleman').

[174] For an analysis of huge expansion in the informal sector, see Ishita Mukhpopadhyay, 'Calcutta's informal sector. Changing patterns of labour use', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 November 1998.

[175] See De Haan, *Unsettled settlers*, for retrenchment in the jute industry.

came to be driven by the informal sector, where the supply of abundant cheap labour, fewer legal and political constraints, and considerably lower overheads were exploited to the hilt.

High unemployment, not only among the middle classes but also among the poor, chronically low wages, scarcity of food and ever rising prices thus became hallmarks of urban life in West Bengal in the decades after partition. Together they were ingredients of a highly flammable cocktail. Calcutta, in particular, always seemed on the brink of disastrous social breakdown. In 1955, the editor of the *Statesman* called on Nehru to warn him that Calcutta could blow up at any moment. He spoke of 'the rumblings below the surface and the occasional explosions', of 'how this terribly over-crowded city, with its crowds of unemployed, live[d] apparently on the brink of trouble'. He told Nehru about crowds which 'gather[ed] at the slightest provocation and ... [did] what[ever] they like[d]', about ominous 'little things [which were] always happening': even when 'there appeared to be quiet, something [was always] brewing'.[176] Events would prove him remarkably prescient. Calcutta had become a veritable powder keg, but so too had Bengal's other bursting towns, ready at any time to explode from one or another of the sparks flying about in its armouries of discontent.

[176] Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 10 January 1955, cited in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 266–7.

4 Staying on: partition and West Bengal's Muslim minorities

India's partition was intended to create a strong, homogeneous nation, capable of being governed effectively from the centre, a goal which could be achieved only by excising from India its Muslim-majority regions. In a parallel but differently motivated campaign, the Hindus who pressed for Bengal's partition wanted to cut out territories in which Muslims were a threatening majority, even if this meant sacrificing the economic viability of their new province. But these partitions were inevitably incomplete. Given the complex history of Muslim migration, conversion and settlement in the sub-continent, dividing India on this basis still left large Muslim minorities inside India, and particularly in the Bengal delta, where, as far back as the twelfth century, many Muslims had settled. By 1947, Bengal had one in three of the sub-continent's Muslims. Those who pressed for the new state of Bengal wanted lines of partition which ensured there were as few Muslim-majority tracts inside their new province as possible and the least number of Muslims. In fact, Radcliffe's Award left over 5 million Muslims in West Bengal, almost a quarter of the new province's total population, and 15 per cent of all the Muslims in the new India. It could hardly have done otherwise.

Partition foisted change – sudden, dramatic and irreversible – upon these 5 million Muslims. Historians concerned with counting the human cost of partition have concentrated on refugees driven across borders by the painful and violent vivisection which it entailed. Partition's impact on the minorities it created on both sides of the border, who remained where they were and did not emigrate as refugees to the new nation of their co-religionists, has not received the attention that it deserves.[1] Yet studies of independent India and Pakistan are incomplete histories unless

[1] Mushirul Hasan's *Legacy of a divided nation. India's Muslims since independence*, Delhi, 1997, presents an overview of the consequences of partition for the Muslims who stayed in India. Kathinka Sinha-Kerkhoff's essay, 'Partition memories, "minoritization" and discourses of rootedness in Jharkhand. A comparison of cross-border displaced and "invisible refugees" in Jharkhand', presented at the Indo-Dutch Programme seminar on 'Displaced

they seek to understand what happened to the minorities who stayed on. This chapter tries to piece together the story of the Muslims of West Bengal after partition, as a small step towards bridging that gap.

The Muslims of western Bengal

It is by now a commonplace among scholars of the sub-continent that the Muslims of India were not a homogeneous community. Nonetheless, it should be repeated here that Muslims of western Bengal were divided in many ways, by ethnic origin, occupation, sect and status. Indeed, they were far more heterogeneous than Muslims in the agrarian tracts of eastern Bengal. Islam's expansion into the western tracts of Bengal had a longer, and more complex, history than its more recent expansion into the marcher regions of the east. Islam first came to western Bengal as the religion of the garrison towns of a cosmopolitan new elite of conquerors and rulers – noblemen, merchants, soldiers and saints from as far afield as Turkey, Arabia, Persia and Abyssinia. Even after Islam acquired a broader and more demotic base in these parts, it continued to have a markedly urban and cosmopolitan character. Well into the twentieth century, the Muslim aristocracy of Bengal continued famously to insist upon its foreign ancestry and, whenever opportunity offered, to speak Persian or Urdu rather than the vernacular of the province in which most of them had lived for so long. The earliest local converts to Islam in western Bengal had been drawn, so the evidence suggests, from urban artisan castes, whether weavers (Jolas), tailors (Darjis), barbers (Napitas), or bow-makers (Tirakars),[2] whose function it was to cater to the needs of their city-based Muslim patrons.

Long after the Mughal conquest of Bengal thrust Islam deep into the Padma delta of the east and into the thick forests and reeded marshes of the north and south-west, in its western setting Islam remained predominantly a religion of townsmen. As Calcutta developed as the East India Company's base from which it expanded into upper India and as a centre of trade and industry, the Muslim population of western Bengal became an even more complex mix than it had been before. In the later eighteenth century, Calcutta was a magnet to which came Cutchi Memons from Kathiawad, Muslim traders in luxury products from Delhi and Lucknow, 'Rankis' – originally from Iraq – who captured the hide trade, and Pathans from the North West Frontier who set up their tanneries and leather

People in South Asia', in Chennai, in March 2001, is pioneering work in this field, as is her recently published work, *Tyranny of partition. Hindus in Bangladesh and Muslims in India*, New Delhi, 2006.

[2] Richard Eaton, *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier, 1204–1760*, Oxford, 1993, p. 101.

shops in the shadow of the Nakhoda mosque. In the later nineteenth century, skilled Muslim artisans from distant parts of India were drawn in ever-growing numbers to this city of opportunity. Calcutta attracted hundreds of butchers, tailors, carpenters, cigarette-makers, book-binders and leather-workers, masters of crafts which Muslims had made their own.[3] In the early twentieth century, they were joined by weavers from up-country looking for work in the jute mills along the Hooghly, and later by a much larger influx of mainly unskilled Muslim labourers from the United Provinces, Bihar and Orissa, drawn by the lure of work on the shop-floors of Calcutta's burgeoning factories.

Another development in the early twentieth century was the coming of age of a small but growing English-educated class of Muslim professionals, who came to play an increasingly prominent role in the city's life. Mainly of local Bengali origin, these matriculates and graduates moved to Calcutta and other large towns of the west after white-collar Muslims began to benefit from government's patronage and its positive discrimination on their behalf. With bhadralok-like ambitions, these Muslims preferred to distance themselves from their ruder co-religionists in Calcutta's sprawling and insalubrious suburbs, and settled instead in the well-to-do central area around Park Circus, favoured by the respectable classes.[4] Each successive wave of migration and settlement thus tended to graft another layer on to the palimpsest of Muslim Calcutta. By 1947, it had become a tessellated mosaic of 'distinct sub-communal groups', each with its own unique and shifting history.[5]

By this time, Muslims in the west of Bengal were to be found not only in the towns and cities but also in large numbers in the countryside, particularly in the northern districts. But even among the Muslim peasants of West Bengal, there were persons of all sorts and conditions. Not all of them were local people. Some, such as the Shershabadiyas, had moved to north Bengal from upper India to bring new land under the plough when the notoriously fickle Ganges changed its course, laying bare rich new alluvial tracts in Malda.[6] Groups of 'Bhatia' Muslim cultivators, who specialised in reclaiming *char*-lands, or recently formed sandbanks, settled along the Ganges as it cut new paths for itself north of Murshidabad, and also along the banks of other lesser but equally mobile and wayward rivers of

[3] Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim microcosm. Calcutta 1918–1935*, Wiesbaden, 1974, pp. 9–15.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 5. [5] *Ibid.*, p. ii.
[6] Legend has it that the Shershabadiyas belonged to Sher Shah's personal army and had been rewarded with land grants in Shershabad pargana: Asok Mitra, *The new India 1948–1955. Memoirs of an Indian civil servant*, Bombay, 1991, p. 4.

the delta.[7] Some Muslim peasants – particularly in the marshy tracts of the Sundarbans – were descended from forest-dwellers who had been converted by the soldier-saints who brought Islam to Bengal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and taught them the peaceful arts of cultivation. Well into the twentieth century – campaigns to 'purify' folk Islam notwithstanding – their version of the faith still contained many elements of older folk religions and animist cults.[8] Despite the fact that these Muslims were virtually all Sunnis – the Shia communities of Murshidabad, Hooghly and Dacca being tiny islets in a Sunni sea – their religious observances and beliefs and day-to-day practices varied greatly from place to place.

By the middle of the twentieth century, Muslims were concentrated in two distinct regions of western Bengal. The first zone, more densely populated, was in the south, in the industrial and urban tracts around Calcutta, the 24 Parganas and the Howrah and Hooghly districts.[9] In some parts of this belt of territory, in particular in Calcutta itself, but also in Bhatpara, Dumdum, Kumarhati and Asansol, Muslims were one in four and often one in three of the population. In the Garden Reach dockland area on the southern banks of the Hooghly, there were as many Muslims as there were Hindus.[10] By 1947, certain parts of Calcutta had already become predominantly 'Muslim', notably Park Circus and Karaya, which were residential areas favoured by the literati, Bowbazar, Calcutta's commercial heart, and Ekbalpur, where poorer Muslims lived. The second belt where Muslims were conspicuously bunched together was in the north, in the mainly agricultural tracts in Murshidabad and beyond Malda.[11] In Murshidabad, Muslims outnumbered Hindus; in rural Malda, West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, and parts of Birbhum, the faithful in their checked *lungis* formed large and visible communities. By contrast, in other

[7] S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 44. See also Iftekhar Khondker Iqbal, 'Ecology, economy and society in the eastern Bengal delta, c. 1840–1943', University of Cambridge, doctoral dissertation, 2005.

[8] By the middle of the nineteenth century, when Buchanan conducted his survey, about 70 per cent of Dinajpur's population were Muslims, but they had forgotten 'the rules of their law on many points': Montgomery Martin, *The history, antiquities, topography and statistics of eastern India. Comprising the districts of Behar, Shahbad, Bhagalpoor, Goruckpoor, Dinajepoor, Puraniya, Rungporr and Assam*, London, 1838, pp. 723–6. For folk Islam in the Bengal countryside, see Eaton, *Rise of Islam* and Asim Roy, *The Islamic syncretist tradition in Bengal*, Princeton, 1983.

[9] An area covering 2,000 square miles, this zone was inhabited by roughly 1.8 million Muslims. Calcutta alone was home to about 500,000 Muslims; the 24 Parganas had almost 900,000, Howrah had 250,000 in a territory of 320 square miles, and Hooghly had about 60,000 Muslims in a compact block of only about 100 square miles or so: S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 52.

[10] See Statement VIII.3, *Census of India 1931*, vol. V, part I, Calcutta, 1933 (henceforth *1931 Census*), p. 278.

[11] In this tract of about 3,000 square miles there were roughly 1.7 million Muslims: *ibid.*

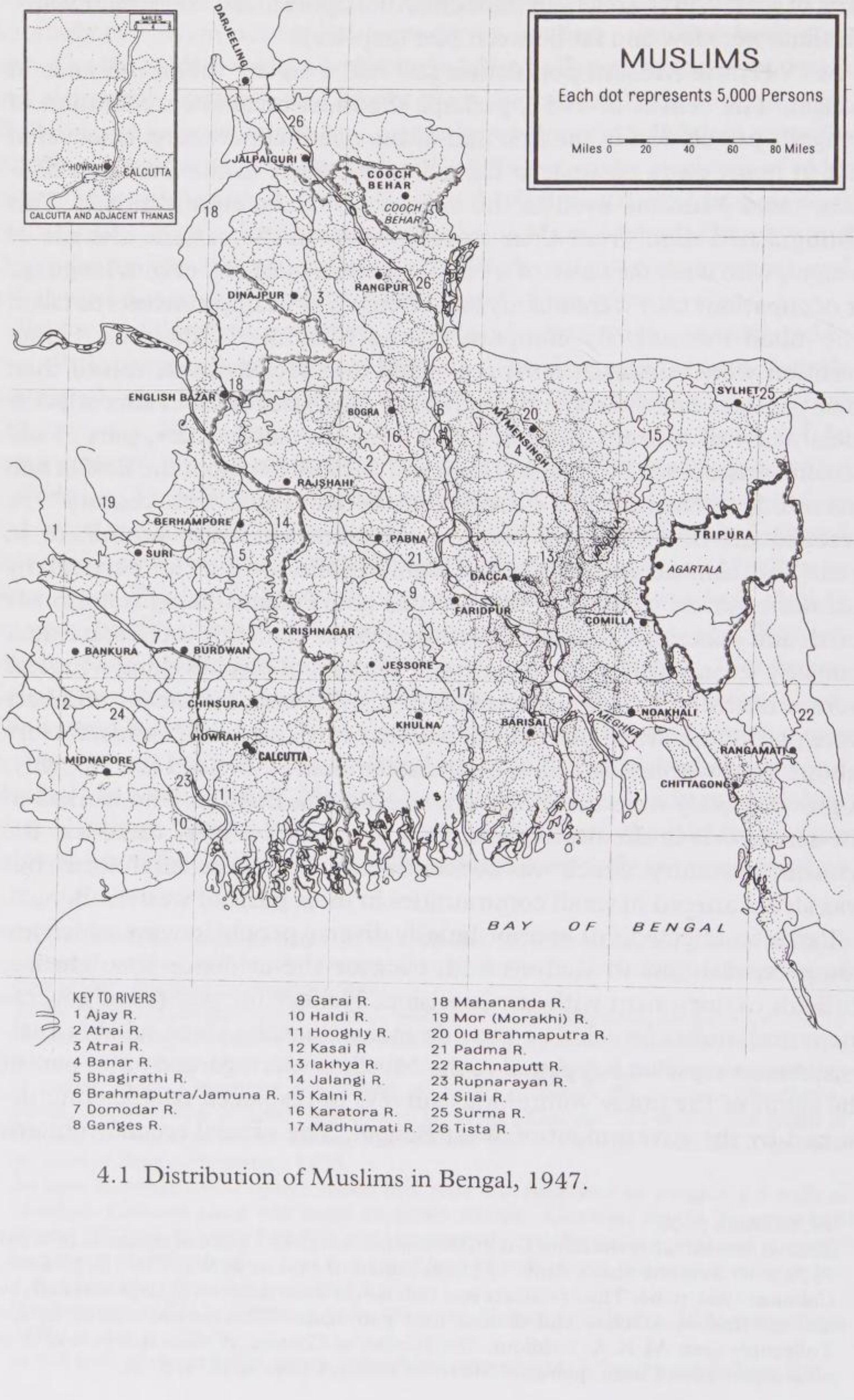
parts of rural West Bengal – in Bankura, Midnapore and western Burdwan – Muslims were few and far between (see map 4.1).

In 1947, the Muslim population still had a strong urban presence in Bengal. The census of 1931, perhaps the most reliable enumeration of Bengal's population in the first half of the twentieth century, discovered that in many parts of western Bengal, particularly in the Burdwan division, more Muslims lived in the cities than in the countryside.[12] This distinguished them from their co-religionists in the eastern districts of Bengal, who were far more of a piece, whether in ethnic origin, language or occupation: they were mainly local Bengali-speaking converts to Islam who tilled the soil. By comparison, the Muslims of the west before partition were ethnically far more varied and socially more mixed than their brothers and sisters in the east; they could be found in almost every social class of western Bengal. Some were big landowners, part of old Muslim aristocracies of Oudh, Delhi and Mysore to whom the British had given lodgement in south Calcutta in the late eighteenth century[13] or descendants of the Bengal Nawabs. Muslims were also prominent in trade and commerce, even in the highly profitable but not particularly Islamic business of usury – the Kabulis and Pathans being notoriously harsh and successful money-lenders, expert at extorting interest on their loans by strong-arm methods. Large numbers of city-dwelling Muslims were artisans, skilled in their hereditary crafts, and significant numbers were part of the urban proletariat, whether working as millhands, factory labour, dockworkers or *lascars* on the steamboats that plied the Hooghly. A growing body were urban literati, educated in English, who worked in the services or in the professions. And of course by 1947 there was the Muslim peasantry, which was concentrated in the more rural north, but was also scattered in small communities in most parts of western Bengal.

Partition affected this extraordinarily diverse people in ways which are complex, resistant to analysis and, because the evidence is so elusive, difficult to document with any precision. Neither the records of government nor studies by scholars provide many clues, let alone reliable analysis. Assessing what happened to the Muslims was regarded as no part of the remit of the many voluminous surveys of displaced people commissioned by the government of West Bengal. The official record contains

12 *1931 Census*, p. 387.

13 Bose writes that 'after the fall of Oudh, the Nawab was given a place of residence in Ward 75; and so were the descendants of Tippu Sultan of Mysore in Ward 78': N. K. Bose, *Calcutta: 1964*, p. 64. Their retainers and staff joined these notables in large numbers, as did the traders, scholars and divines they patronised. They settled mainly in the Tollygunje area: M. K. A. Siddiqui, *The Muslims of Calcutta. A study in aspects of their social organisation* (Anthropological Survey of India), Calcutta, 1974, p. 21.



4.1 Distribution of Muslims in Bengal, 1947.

only passing references to Muslim refugees.[14] In the half-century after partition, the decennial censuses abandoned the British practice of listing by religion statistics of occupation, literacy, marriage and migration. In consequence, the effects of partition upon the Muslims of West Bengal, and their responses to these changes, have to be teased out from scanty, mainly anecdotal, evidence, and the hidden complexities have often to be discovered from hints contained in unlikely and obscure sources, which pose difficulties of access as well as of interpretation.

Flight

Partition dramatically changed the position and status of the Muslims of West Bengal. For a decade before 1947, Muslims had been the political masters of united Bengal, increasingly asserting themselves in the social and cultural life of their neighbourhoods, even in places where Hindus outnumbered them.[15] At a stroke, partition reduced the Muslim majority to being an exposed and vulnerable minority. After partition, Muslims all over West Bengal lived in fear, hardly surprising in the aftermath of the Calcutta killings of 1946, the pogroms in Bihar and the deadly sequence of intimidation and murder which became regular features of Calcutta life.

Muslim reactions to their predicament were not of a piece. They could not have been. As with their Hindu counterparts in East Bengal, different Muslims responded in different ways when their lives and property were at risk. Many factors determined what they decided to do, including what assets they possessed, how easily they could take them if they decamped, what skills they had and whether these talents were sufficiently in demand to earn them a living in the east, what contacts, families or friends, they had across the border, and how their prospects might compare as refugees in a new land with staying on in the west and trying to weather the storm. It mattered to their decisions whether they lived in clusters or were scattered thinly in isolated pockets; it also mattered whether they were near the border or far from it.

Leaving West Bengal and fleeing to East Bengal was one obvious response for large numbers of Muslims. Yet there is no accurate record of how many Muslims crossed the border from the west into eastern

[14] At the time of the 1951 census, the State Statistical Bureau conducted a survey of displaced Muslims, which is referred to in the *Survey of unemployment in West Bengal, 1953*, p. 5. However, it has not been possible to find a copy of the Bureau's survey anywhere. The first census of West Bengal taken after partition was in 1951; under the superintendence of Asok Mitra, it discussed the Muslim diaspora but failed to produce a full or reliable account of how many Muslims had been displaced: *1951 Census*, pp. 218ff.

[15] J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 213–19.

Pakistan. In 1951, the Pakistan census counted 700,000 Muslim *muhajirs* in East Bengal,[16] of whom two-thirds, or 486,000, were known to be refugees from West Bengal.[17] But the number of Muslims who fled eastwards was probably much higher than that. The 1961 census of Pakistan found that there were 850,000 people in East Bengal who in 1951 had been recorded as having been born in other parts of the sub-continent but who had become citizens of Pakistan; and it counted another 125,000 who were 'non-Pakistanis from India'.[18] If all of these were refugees (and it seems that most were), already by 1951 Muslim refugees in East Bengal had come to number about a million, and roughly seven in ten had come from West Bengal. In 1964, Muslims from India once again took flight in large numbers to East Pakistan in a second wave of refugees of roughly the same magnitude as the first, originating mainly from West Bengal and the north-east of India.[19] In the two decades after partition, conservative (and admittedly crude) estimates thus suggest that perhaps 1.5 million Muslims migrated from West Bengal to eastern Pakistan.

In a pattern not dissimilar to the exodus of Hindus into West Bengal, Muslims crossed the border in the other direction over a period of many years, sometimes in trickles and sometimes in big waves. But the imperfect records of these turbulent times leave the observer with only the roughest of ideas about who among the Muslims left, where they went and why. It is known that the largest waves of Muslim refugees were created by communal violence, the biggest being from Nadia in 1950–1, which Asok Mitra, the first census commissioner of West Bengal, described as so substantial that it amounted almost to a total exchange of population. Somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 Muslims from Nadia fled across the border to escape savage mobs of Hindu refugees and their local allies.[20]

[16] *Muhajir* is the term used to describe persons who had moved to Pakistan 'as a result of partition of the fear of disturbances connected therewith. Persons who came for that reason are muhajirs for census purposes, no matter from where, when or for how long a stay they have come': *Census of Pakistan, 1951*, vol. III, *East Bengal, Report and Tables*, Karachi (n.d.) (henceforth *Census of Pakistan 1951*, vol. III), p. 39.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 80. [18] *Census of Pakistan 1961*, vol. II, *East Pakistan*, Karachi, 1964, pp. ii–31.

[19] The government of India estimated that in the eight days from 6 to 14 January 1964 alone, approximately 70,000 Muslims fled their homes in West Bengal: 'Consolidated abstract of information on the communal incidents in West Bengal. From January 6 till 10 pm January 14', Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I, File No. 19/12/64 Poll-I. See also Kamaluddin, 'Refugee problems in Bangladesh', pp. 221–2.

[20] No official figures were published on how many Muslims fled from Nadia in 1950. An article in *Paigam* in 1956 stated that 60,000 Muslim families had been forced out, which would put the total at roughly 240,000, given an average family of four: *Paigam*, 15 September 1956. Of course, not all of these families went to East Bengal, but that many did is supported by the Pakistan census of 1951, which counted 137,000 refugees in Pakistani Nadia (renamed Kushtia): *Census of Pakistan 1951*, vol. III, p. 39. See also chapter 3 in this book.

Table 4.1. *Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta, 1901–1951*

Year	Hindus	Muslims	Muslims as a percentage of Hindus
1901	603,310	270,797	44.9
1911	672,206	275,280	41.0
1921	725,561	248,912	34.3
1931	796,628	281,520	35.3
1941	1,531,512	497,535	32.5
1951	2,125,907	305,932	14.4

Source: Census of India 1951, vol. VI, part III, *Calcutta city*, p. xv.

Almost as many Muslims left Calcutta to get away from the intimidation and violence they were subjected to in the city after partition. The West Bengal government estimated that, by 1951, 15,000 Muslims had emigrated from Calcutta alone to East Bengal 'through fear of disturbances'. Again the actual numbers were probably much higher than these official estimates. In 1951, the census discovered 130,000 fewer Muslims in Calcutta than it had expected.[21] It is not unreasonable to deduce that the explanation for this demographic anomaly was, at least in part, because many Muslims had fled the capital in the intervening decades (see table 4.1). After the riots of 1950, large numbers left Howrah. Thousands more migrated when a rash of anti-Muslim pogroms broke out in India in the mid-1950s, not only in West Bengal and Assam, but also in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Whenever Hindus and Muslims fell upon each other, whether in India or in Pakistan, terrified Muslims in West Bengal left their homes. The riots in East Bengal, the troubles which accompanied the accessions of Hyderabad and Kashmir and the bloodletting in Jubbulpore all pushed Muslim families over the edge into emigrating to Pakistan. In 1964, in the wake of the ugly communal rioting sparked off by the Hazratbal incident,[22] another 800,000 Indian Muslims left for East Bengal, most coming from West Bengal.[23]

[21] *Census of India 1951*, vol. VI, part III, *Calcutta city*, p. xvi. This figure was based on projections for 'normal' growth derived from the 1931 census, which Asok Mitra, its author, believed with good reason to be much more reliable than the count taken during the war in 1941. If Mitra's projections for Calcutta's Muslim population had been based on the 1941 census, the number of 'missing' Muslims would have been considerably larger.

[22] The accession of Hyderabad, the Kashmir war and the Jubbulpore riots led to relatively modest migrations, but the violence in 1964 which followed the Hazratbal incident was on a much larger scale, and led to significant exoduses from both sides of the Bengal frontier.

[23] Kamaluddin, 'Refugee problems in Bangladesh', pp. 221–2.

Other Muslims left in a more considered fashion and in circumstances which were less dramatic. For example, government servants had the option of serving either in India or in Pakistan, and had been given six months in which to make up their minds. Most top Muslim officers understandably decided to go to Pakistan: indeed, all but one of the nineteen Muslim Indian civil servants in undivided Bengal opted to serve the government of Pakistan.[24] In their train there followed large numbers of humbler public servants – orderlies, peons, clerks, tellers, watchmen and police constables – who left in sufficient numbers after partition to cause a temporary crisis in the bottom echelons of West Bengal's administration. Of course, it was not always easy to distinguish between government employees who went of their own volition[25] and those who were pushed: there were some ugly hints of a systematic campaign of intimidation to 'persuade' Muslims in government service to get out and go to Pakistan.[26] Nor was it uncommon for well-to-do Muslims to send some family members across the border in order to hedge their bets in Pakistan, while the head of the household stayed on to defend his stake in land or in business in West Bengal.[27] In some

[24] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 45.

[25] As Md. Mahbubar Rahman and Willem van Schendel have shown, many Muslim 'optees' saw their decision to cross over into eastern Pakistan as a career move, and declined to accept the status of 'refugees': '"I am *not* a refugee." Rethinking partition migration', *Modern Asian Studies*, 37, 3 (2003).

[26] In June and July 1947, persons never caught by the police launched a campaign of murdering Muslim policemen in Calcutta and Howrah in broad daylight, no doubt *pour encourager les autres*. On 26 June 1947, an up-country Muslim constable on duty in Calcutta was shot dead at close range. No one was brought to book: GB IB File No. 614/47. On 23 June, another constable was shot at and injured while on patrol at Madhusudan Biswas Lane in Howrah. 'No culprits were traced': Howrah District Report dated 11 October 1947, *ibid.* On 7 July 1947, in a high-profile incident, S. S. Huq, who was in charge of Muchipara police station, was murdered: *ibid.* On this occasion, the army had to be called out to put down the violence which took place after his funeral, in which 40 people died and about 200 were injured: S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 50–1. On 2 July 1947, two constables, one Hindu and one Muslim, were on duty at Satcowrie Chatterjee Lane, Howrah, when the Muslim was shot in the back and later died of his injuries. Again 'no culprit was found': GB IB File No. 1123/47.

[27] A Muslim family from Barasat, some of whose members migrated to Pakistan in 1964, is a case in point. The immediate nuclear family consisted of the parents and their nine children, of whom only three subsequently migrated to Pakistan, following one of their paternal uncles who had gone there first. One brother left Barasat for another village in West Bengal. The rest remained where they were. 'There seemed too much at stake: their property for example. By this time everyone in the family was comfortably off, each with his own side business, mostly shopkeeping. That they had their own high school in the village was mentioned as a plus point. Besides no one wanted to go to a "backward place" leaving behind their property. So the general feeling was to keep an open mind about it.' The study of this family shows how the resource base, social mobility, kinship connections and the stage in the lifecycle of individuals all played a part in determining who migrated to Pakistan and who stayed behind. See Guhathakurta, 'Families uprooted and divided'.

instances, Muslims who had estates in West Bengal were able to make deals with propertied Hindus from the east by which they exchanged their plots and holdings with each other, whether legally or in less formal ways.[28]

Such evidence as is available suggests that, in a pattern not dissimilar to that of Hindu refugees moving westwards, wealthier and mainly urban Muslims who could take their assets and skills with them left West Bengal after weighing their options and calculating the costs of staying on; and they did so more readily and in larger numbers than their poorer co-religionists. The poor, especially the rural poor, left only when the going got very rough indeed and there was extreme violence and intimidation. This impression is confirmed by the census of 1951, which showed how the proportion of Muslims in West Bengal's districts had dropped after partition (see table 4.2).

Once again, the evidence of the census is not conclusive,[29] but its data suggest certain characteristics of Muslim emigration from West Bengal. The largest exoduses were from Nadia and Calcutta.[30] Muslims also left in large numbers from border districts, in particular, from West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Malda and the 24 Parganas, presumably because they had kinsfolk and contacts on the other side. Murshidabad, however, was a striking exception. It was a border district, but Muslims in Murshidabad stood fast, perhaps because they were the majority community in the district and, on the principle of safety in numbers, stayed on.

But perhaps the most striking point that table 4.2 makes is the sharp fall in Muslims in the towns and cities of Bengal. The proportion of Muslims in Calcutta fell by more than half, in urban Nadia by three-quarters and in urban Jalpaiguri by more than 90 per cent. After partition, Muslims throughout West Bengal progressively became a much smaller presence

[28] In a typical case in September 1950, a Muslim of Fulnapur 'migrated to Pakistan after exchanging some properties with a Hindu'. In April 1950, a Muslim of Baramaricha in Sitalkuchi in Cooch Behar left for Pakistan, giving over his *adhiar* right to planted jute to a Hindu refugee. These, and many similar cases, are reported in the 'Fortnightly Reports of Border Incidents in West Bengal' (henceforth FRBI) for 1950, GB IB File No. 1238 A–47. See also Nakatani, 'Away from home'.

[29] Since the decline in Muslim numbers is shown as a proportion of the population rather than in absolute terms, it is impossible to be sure whether it can be explained solely by the emigration of Muslims. As was seen in chapter 3, many of these districts also witnessed huge influxes of Hindu refugees from East Bengal, and this may well have been a factor in reducing the proportion of Muslims in the population as a whole.

[30] The falls recorded by West Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri in this table are also dramatic, but the 1931 figures were calculated for the undivided districts and in consequence the true picture cannot be ascertained with any certainty. Darjeeling had only a tiny number of Muslims to begin with, so any exodus from it was likely to have been small in absolute numbers.

Table 4.2. *Geographical distribution of Muslims per 10,000 population, 1901–1951*

District	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	Change in proportion of Muslims in the population, 1931–51 per cent (+ or −)
West Bengal total	2939	2960	2946	3008	2948	1985	−34
Rural	2980	3015	3043	3119	3127	2258	
Urban	2618	2564	2313	2345	2190	1158	
Burdwan total	1875	1888	1851	1856	1781	1560	−15.9
Rural	1854	1867	1826	1830	1757	1582	
Urban	2229	2206	2198	2148	1953	1435	
Birbhum total	2235	2382	2507	2669	2741	2686	+0.6
Rural	2231	2381	2524	2675	2798	2786	
Urban	2648	2483	1895	2395	1800	1233	
Bankura total	458	454	457	459	431	440	−4
Rural	464	462	461	462	435	453	
Urban	346	314	387	416	378	473	
Midnapur total	664	686	678	759	773	717	−5.5
Rural	650	666	658	728	738	727	
Urban	1044	1217	1256	1363	1321	595	
Hooghly total	1760	1688	1608	1617	1503	1327	−17.9
Rural	1784	1690	1593	1593	1489	1415	
Urban	1584	1674	1680	1727	1557	1017	
Howrah total	2059	2073	2030	2126	1998	1662	−23.7
Rural	1978	1995	1996	2112	2067	1928	
Urban	2370	2360	2152	2176	1794	985	
24 Parganas total	3624	3613	3462	3365	3247	2535	−24.6
Rural	3802	3796	3670	3590	3483	3014	
Urban	2886	2985	2800	2458	2515	1308	
Calcutta	2948	2696	2303	2600	2359	1200	−53.8
Nadia[a] total	5985	5953	6018	6177	6126	2236	−63.8
Rural	6093	6169	6272	6471	6499	2616	
Urban	2635	2530	2365	2188	1920	526	
Murshidabad	5077	5197	5357	5556	5655	5524	−0.57
Rural	5218	5346	5539	5728	5889	5812	
Urban	2748	2887	2916	3167	2701	2161	
Malda[a] total	4807	5033	5151	5428	5678	3697	−31.89
Rural	4784	5002	5165	5434	5697	3766	
Urban	5374	5747	2887	5236	5240	1931	
West Dinajpur[a] total	4957	4884	4907	5051	5020	2994	−40.72
Rural	4967	4897	4927	5075	5068	3160	
Urban	5374	3475	3064	2947	2858	312	
Jalpaiguri[a] total	2902	2631	2475	2399	2308	974	−59.39
Rural	2892	2617	2467	2396	2300	1031	

Table 4.2. (*cont.*)

District	1901	1911	1921	1931	1941	1951	Change in proportion of Muslims in the population, 1931–51 per cent (+ or −)
Urban	3637	3683	2970	2590	2604	247	
Darjeeling total	370	356	301	263	242	144	−45
Rural	349	340	289	206	168	86	
Urban	594	508	413	623	651	359	

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: Census of India 1951, vol. VI, part I-C, pp. 4–5.
[a] Proportions for 1901–1941 for the districts Nadia, Malda, West Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri are based on pre-partition (1947) figures.

in the towns. In 1931, almost one in four of West Bengal's urban population had been Muslim. Between 1931 and 1951, the proportion of Muslims in urban West Bengal was halved. This remarkable trend persisted well beyond 1951, continuing thereafter 'steadily but rather slowly'.[31] By 1971, only one in ten of West Bengal's city-dwelling population was a Muslim. The census of that year noted that almost every town and city in West Bengal, and particularly Calcutta and its environs and the towns on the western bank of the Hooghly, 'show[ed] the effects of partition as far as the religious composition of the population is concerned'. According to the census commissioner, this pattern of decline 'reflects the greater mobility of urban populations' due to 'economic factors'; Muslims who lived in towns and had some cash, skills and education were the most easily able to leave their homes.[32] The statistics prove that they did so in large numbers, irrevocably transforming urban West Bengal's political geography, as well as its social and cultural profile.

Staying on – 'assimilation'

But for every Muslim who left West Bengal after partition, there were many more who stayed on.[33] Those who remained tended to be the weak and the poor, who had few or no assets, no connections and hardly any

[31] *Census of India 1971*, series 22, *West Bengal*, part I-A, pp. 278–9. [32] *Ibid.*, p. 279.
[33] Again, there are no definitive figures for this ratio. But if it is assumed that some 750,000 Muslims out of a total population of 5 million left West Bengal soon after 1947, this suggests that for every Muslim who left, more than four stayed behind.

skills to help them begin a new life across the border,[34] although significantly some of those who could most easily have migrated to Pakistan elected to remain in India.[35]

In the bitterly anti-Muslim climate of post-partition West Bengal, those who stayed on adopted strategies of survival which varied according to circumstance.[36] But almost every Muslim who decided to remain realised that to do so in any safety meant that they would have to eat humble pie and proclaim their allegiance to India, to communal harmony and to secularism. The literate among them would certainly have read between the lines of the Congress Working Committee's resolution on 'minorities'. Even as it assured 'the minorities in India' that the Congress government would continue to protect 'to the best of its ability their citizen rights against aggression', the Congress high command warned them that 'it would not tolerate the existence within its borders of disloyal elements' and, in a way which Enoch Powell might later have applauded, expressed its readiness to provide 'full facilities ... to those who wish to migrate from the Indian Union'.[37] In effect, the Congress had thrown down the gauntlet to all Muslims who remained in India, challenging them either to prove their loyalty to the new republic or to get out.

In response to this crude requirement that Muslims 'assimilate' or leave, even the more influential Muslims felt it necessary publicly to renounce their old allegiances. After India became independent, former leaders of the once-powerful Muslim League quickly distanced themselves from the party. In November 1947, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, who had until recently been the premier of the Muslim League government of Bengal,

[34] Van Hear's argument that 'migration abroad is rarely an option for the poorest households, even though they may be among the most vulnerable in terms of economic or physical security' appears to hold as much for the poor Muslims of West Bengal as for the poor Hindus of East Bengal. See Nicholas Van Hear, 'Refugee diasporas. Trans-national links among displaced people in South Asia and beyond', paper presented at a seminar on 'Displaced people in South Asia', Chennai, March 2001.

[35] These included some of the rank-and-file Muslims in the government's employ, whom Asok Mitra, soon to take over as census superintendent, found, hanging on to their jobs when he was posted to Malda in 1947 and also in Murshidabad when he arrived there in 1949. See Mitra, *The new India*, pp. 1, 49.

[36] Describing his experiences as district magistrate in 1947 and 1948, Asok Mitra refers to the 'recurrent tendency' amongst Malda's Hindus to embark on 'a witchhunt of Muslims'; and describes the list prepared by the outgoing magistrate of Murshidabad of 30,000 'undesirable Muslim families': *ibid.*, pp. 24, 29. The police files too are redolent of ugly anti-Muslim prejudices, and not only in the period immediately after partition.

[37] Congress Working Committee Resolution dated 24 September 1947, AICC-I, G-30/1946. In what is probably an apocryphal story, Enoch Powell was asked for a loan of sixpence by an Indian immigrant, in order to make up his fare back to India. Powell gave him two shillings and sixpence, saying 'My man, do take four of your compatriots along with you!'

convened a conference of Muslim leaders in Calcutta to discuss their way forward. Most of them recognised that the League in effect 'had ceased to exist' and that 'Muslims must now independently steer their course in independent India.' Their resolutions proclaimed the need for harmony and cooperation between the two governments of India and Pakistan. Reporting on the conference, the *Star of India*, a Calcutta paper that spoke for the League, urged 'a fusion ... be effected between the League and the nationalist Muslim leadership', claiming that partition had wiped away any distinctions between them.[38] If political Muslims were to survive in a Hindu-majority West Bengal, they could see that the Muslim League would have to be allowed to die a quiet death.

It soon became obvious, and not only to those who had travelled under the banner of the Muslim League, that simply to repudiate the League would not be enough. Muslims would have to display 'allegiance and loyalty to the state' in more positive ways.[39] In November 1947, the Muslim Conference in Lucknow called upon 'the Mussalmans of India to be members only of non-communal political parties and advise[d] them to join the Indian National Congress'.[40] Many Bengali Muslim notables accepted this advice. For the most important among them, a damascene 'conversion' to the Congress was, paradoxically, made easier by factional wars within the Bengal Congress and by Bidhan Chandra Roy's uncertain grip over the Assembly. Partition and a Congress constitution which allocated representation on the basis of the size of the population had created the anomaly of a West Bengal Congress temporarily dominated by Bengalis from the east. After partition, the Bengal Congress witnessed another spectacular burst of fratricidal strife as different factions struggled to capture an organisation and a ministry which were up for grabs.[41] In consequence, Roy and his ally, the machine politician Atulya Ghosh, were eager to attract Muslim grandees into their party in the Bengal Assembly, since this would bring much-needed support to their particular faction in the House.[42]

[38] *Star of India*, 14 November 1947, GB IB File No. 1045–47.

[39] Vallabhbhai Patel, in his characteristically blunt way, insisted that mere protestations were not enough and demanded 'practical proof' of Muslim loyalty. His comment that 'you don't know what it is costing the government to protect you' was hardly calculated to reassure Muslims: cited in Hasan, *Legacy of a divided nation*, p. 148.

[40] This resolution was moved by the communist S. A. Brelvi and supported by Dr Z. A. Ahmed and Humayun Kabir: AICC-I, G-23/1946–48.

[41] These events are discussed in chapter 5.

[42] The factions opposed to Roy and Ghosh saw what was happening, but could do little about it, as any protest would immediately have been denounced by the ruling group as motivated by communal and anti-Muslim sentiments. Writing in protest against Dr B. C. Roy's admission of a Muslim to the Congress Assembly Party, Amarkrishna Ghosh declared that 'the inclusion of Muslims and Anglo-Indians should be decided on a

But bringing Leaguers into the Congress was not always a smooth or easy process, especially at the grass-roots, where many Hindu members of the old guard in the Congress refused to accept as bedfellows Muslims who had until recently been their enemies.[43] Nor were these alliances of convenience always welcomed by 'nationalist Muslims' (as Muslims who supported the Congress before independence were known). Before 1947, nationalist Muslims had resisted the blandishments of the Muslim League and stood firm against the swelling tide of Muslim communal opinion and, in consequence, they had been banished to the margins of Muslim politics in Bengal.[44] With the Congress party which they had supported now in power in West Bengal, they quite reasonably looked forward to recognition and reward. Instead, the Congress decided to lavish its patronage upon Muslims who they deemed could most effectively deliver the political goods, and these were the Muslim Leaguers who crossed the floor, not the nationalists who were far less effective or influential in their constituencies. The fate of Jehangir Kabir is a case in point. In 1950 Kabir, a nationalist Muslim of long standing, asked to be given the Congress ticket to a Muslim seat in the Central Legislative Assembly which the Congress Parliamentary Board had allocated to another, and more recently recruited, Muslim would-be politician. Kabir rested his claim on his own record of loyal commitment to the party and the fact that 'the other recommended gentleman never

principle to be approved by the Central Parliamentary Board . . . Even in this province, if one Muslim is now admitted into the Congress Assembly Party, many others would apply for such admission and it would be difficult to resist their admission on logical grounds. And the inclusion of many Muslim members into the Party may not be advisable at this juncture of Indian politics': Amarkrishna Ghosh and eight others to Sitaramayya, 4 March 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1949. In reply, Roy was quick to occupy the moral and 'secular' high ground, defending the inclusion of Shamsul Huq, elected as an independent candidate, as a man 'who has always been working with Congress since 1924 . . . I am perfectly sure that the Congress will not in any case countenance such a proposition that we oust an applicant simply because he happens to be a Muslim, or that the inclusion of Muslim members would be inadvisable': B. C. Roy to Kala Venkatarao, 9 April 1949, *ibid.*

43 One pamphlet lamented the fate of the Congress, demanding to know 'how is it that the newly elected Deputy President [of the Malda District Congress Committee] Janab Latif Hussain (Arapur) who was a member of the district Muslim National Guard and who was never even a delegate of the Congress, how has he suddenly become Deputy President? . . . How has Janab Mohammad Sayyad, who was the secretary of the Malda Jila Muslim League and who never represented the Congress, been appointed to the Working Committee of the Malda District Congress?' The pamphlet claimed that the lack of scruple with which Muslims of doubtful credentials were being drafted into the Congress had driven true Congressmen, including the author himself, out of the organisation: Bibhuti Bhushan Chakravarti, *Ihai ki Congressi adarsh?* ('Are these really Congress's ideals?'), in AICC-II, PB-3/1951.

44 Just how marginal they were is reflected in the fact that the Congress put up only two Muslim candidates in the 1946 elections, both of whom were trounced at the polls by Muslim League rivals. See J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, p. 130.

belonged to [the] Congress . . . [and was] not even an ordinary Congress member'.[45] Kabir's request was ignored: the Congress ticket went to his rival. The hard calculus of politics meant that influential, and once blatantly communal, leaders with Muslim League connections were welcomed more readily by the new political establishment than the Congress's old allies. Kabir's plaintive letter to the Congress high command sounded a note of bitter disillusionment with the new order, sentiments not uncommon in nationalist Muslim circles in the political turnabouts which Bengal's partition set in motion.

The ruling coterie of the Congress were not alone in putting *Realpolitik* at the top of their agenda. Every faction in Bengal's politics joined in the race to recruit influential Muslims, without heed to their political antecedents. When by-elections were held in the 24 Parganas central Muslim constituency in 1951, Atulya Ghosh complained that Prafulla Ghosh's breakaway Krishak Majdoor Praja Party (KMPP) had put up against the Congress candidate 'Jenab Khairul Islam, a noted Muslim Leaguer, son of Maulana Akram Khan, ex-president of the Bengal Muslim League and present president of the Muslim League of east Pakistan'. He accused the opposition of 'associating with noted Muslim Leaguers who are still doing all sorts of mischief against communal harmony',[46] but, given the ruling faction's own record in wooing yesterday's enemies, everyone could see this was a case of Atulya's sooty pot calling Prafulla's kettle black.

The cynicism with which the Congress welcomed prominent Muslims into its fold was often mirrored by the equally hard-headed calculations of those Muslims who decided to join up. A typical case was Mahbub Huq,[47] whose visit to Jalpaiguri in 1957, 'ostensibly' to canvass support for the Congress in the election, was the subject of a long and rather panic-stricken intelligence report. According to the district's intelligence officer, Huq had joined the Congress soon after partition, although he later became a citizen of Pakistan. While he was still in India, he kept lines open to the Mohammedan Sporting Club and gave a lot of his money (and also persuaded other Muslims to follow suit) to the Azad Kashmir Fund. In the police officer's opinion, this was proof positive that Huq's support for the Congress was only skin-deep. In 1951, Mahbub Huq had sold off most of his assets in India, but continued, or so the police

[45] Jehangir Kabir to Vallabhbhai Patel, 9 September 1950, AICC-II, PB-3/1950.
[46] The Congress candidate in the election, Abdus Sukkur, was also a Muslim: enclosure in B. S. Nahar to AICC President, 21 January 1951, AICC-II, PB-3/1951.
[47] This is not the man's real name; despite the passage of half a century, it has been changed to protect his anonymity and to comply with the specific request of the head of the Intelligence Branch in Calcutta.

suspected, to derive 'secret earnings' from Muslim-owned tea estates, which were the source of the 'black' monies which had paid for the 'palatial' house he built for himself in Dacca. According to the report, 'one of his satellites', a Hindu sanitary inspector, had helped him get his loot out of India and into Pakistan. So this underling, not versed in the canny statecraft of his political overlords, was shocked to find that Huq's visit to Jalpaiguri in 1957 was 'warmly backed by the President of the Jalpaiguri District Congress Committee, by a former Vice-President of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, by two [Hindu] MLAs and by a [Hindu] member of the Council of States'.[48] Admittedly this assessment was probably jaundiced by the anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistani paranoia of the not very senior policeman who penned the report. But this little saga nonetheless gives a hint of some of the strategies deployed by resourceful Muslims who were able successfully to hedge their bets on both sides of the border, maintaining alliances, hanging on to property and playing both ends against the middle. By devices such as these, often with the connivance of the Congress establishment, well-connected Muslims were able to survive partition and sometimes even to do well out of it.

This selective induction of influential Muslim notables into the new political establishment eased their return to prominence in West Bengal's post-partition order, but should not be taken as evidence of a genuine change of heart among West Bengal's Hindu political elites in their underlying attitudes towards Muslims. In 1951, Dr Roy's government began to 'cleanse' the border zones of Muslims, 'presumably . . . because it [was] thought that they might be unreliable elements in times of trouble', a strategy which provoked a sharp reprimand from Nehru but reflected the prevailing view in Bengal that Muslims were inherently 'disloyal'.[49] Many Muslim politicians continued to voice their concern about the prejudices of the leadership of the Congress party and the latent hostility towards them.[50] In 1956, one Muslim spokesman from Bengal wrote to Nehru that his people were being systematically dropped from

[48] Copy of the Report of the DIO dated 13 February 1957, GB IB File No. 114–57.

[49] Jawaharlal Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 15 September 1951, cited in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 192–3.

[50] Zakariah asked to be allowed to 'submit a memorandum to the Congress High Command about the state of affairs of the Muslims in West Bengal – who are about 26 per cent of the total population which is not a negligible number, but their position is not the same as [that] of their co-religionists living in other states . . . A large number of ours are still very staunch Congressmen but they are compelled to remain outside for the time being because of the present undesirable High Command of the West Bengal State Congress Committee': A. K. M. Zakariah to Lal Bahadur Shastri, 26 April 1952, AICC-II, PB-21/1952.

the electoral roll; government orders which affected their lives and times, he complained to the prime minister, were published only in papers which most of his co-religionists did not, or could not, read. In summary, 'the feeling of the Minority Community [was] that they [were] being deprived of [the right to vote] intentionally and in an organised manner'.[51]

Nor did the acceptance of a few prominent Muslim leaders into the Congress fold do much to improve the sense of security among the Muslim rank and file. While Dr B. C. Roy was opening the door to let a few big Muslim bosses into the Congress Assembly party, lesser figures in the party waged petty but vicious wars against defenceless Muslims on the ground. The Congress Committee of Ward 25 in Calcutta in the Kidderpore area, for instance, gained an unsavoury reputation for being 'a danger to local Mohammedans'. Its members once forced '22 Mohammedans to leave possession of a room and their belongings [and] carted [them] away to a distant tank [large pond]. Some of the men were locked up in the Congress office. Police rendered [them] no assistance . . . because [their tormentors had] Congress backing.'[52] This incident was not untypical: after partition just as before it, the ruffians who hounded Muslims wore *khadi topis* quite as often as khaki shorts.[53]

In these and other insidious ways, partition helped to form new fault lines and construct new layers of stratification among West Bengal's Muslims. It created a gulf between the fortunate few who were able to find security and a way back into the mainstream of the new order, and the great majority who were not. Ordinary Muslims faced intimidation and harassment in their day-to-day lives and were particularly vulnerable whenever communal tension flared into open violence. They too tried in their little ways to adopt new strategies for survival, but the options open to them were much more limited. Holding no court cards in their hands, staying on in West Bengal for the Muslim poor and meek meant they had to make sacrifices, accept defeats and absorb losses.

Just as the Muslim elites had done, poorer Muslims also tried to demonstrate that they were ready to assimilate into the new order and to accept a subordinate status within it. One way of demonstrating this was to surrender without protest previously entrenched rights to the public observance of their religious rituals and claims to public space.

[51] S. M. Salahuddin, Chief Administrative Officer, Anjuman Mufidul Islam, to Jawaharlal Nehru, 28 July 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

[52] R. Ghosh to Vallabhbhai Patel, AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1949. Ghosh resigned his Congress membership in protest against this incident.

[53] *Khadi* caps, made of homespun cotton, were a badge of Congress membership and a symbol of adherence to Gandhi's principles of truth and non-violence, just as khaki shorts were the insignia of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha's Hindu right-wing volunteers.

Under British rule, rights to perform rituals in public were governed by traditions of precedence – a local community was permitted to perform a ceremony or hold a procession in a public place provided it had done so in the past and had established a 'customary' right to do so.[54] In the twilight of the Raj, disputes between the rival communities over precedents about festivals lay at the root of much communal violence. Yet this was one British practice to which the governments of independent India, at the centre and in the states, continued to adhere. In 1948, the Home Department issued a memorandum, circulated to every district officer, which firmly reiterated that Muslims continued to retain their traditional rights to sacrifice cows: ' So far as the celebration of Bakr-Id is concerned, the principle which has always been followed in cases of dispute is that previous custom should be maintained. *No innovations should be allowed*';[55] and this rule was enshrined in the statute book in the West Bengal Animal Slaughter Control Act of 1950.[56]

It was no small concession for Muslims voluntarily to abjure precedents which assured them these continued rights. These were entitlements for which they had fought long and hard, and which were regarded in the annals of their community as historic victories. It was a particularly significant step for them to renounce entrenched rights to perform the perennially controversial ritual of cow-sacrifice in Hindu territory. And yet this is what many Muslims now chose to do. Perhaps because the issue of cow-killing was so highly charged, so public and so bound up with issues of power and history, this was the one visible and hugely symbolic gesture Muslims could make to broadcast the fact that they understood their predicament and accepted the new realities of their minority status. In 1947 and again in 1948, on many occasions when trouble was expected at Bakr-Id, the police found to their surprise that Muslims had chosen, of their own accord, with or without some behind-the-scenes 'persuasion', not to perform *go-korbani* or cow-sacrifice. In a typical instance in October 1947, police were called to the Champdany jute mills after Hindus held street meetings demanding that local Muslims give up go-korbani. Expecting trouble on the occasion of Bakr-Id, the police rushed in force to the area but discovered that the Muslims had decided of their

[54] See J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 212–13; and K. Prior, 'Making history. The state's intervention in religious disputes in the North-Western Provinces in the early nineteenth century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27, 1 (1993).

[55] The memorandum of 1948 is quoted in a letter dated 11 September 1950 from the Secretary to the Government of West Bengal Home (Police) Department to all district officers of West Bengal, GB IB File No. 1802–57 (Part I) (emphasis in the original).

[56] Government of West Bengal, Department of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Forests, circular no. 8016-Vety, dated 25 June 1957, GB IB File No. 1802–57.

own volition not to make a stand. They reported that 'Muslims who are in a minority are afraid of wounding the religious feeling of the Hindus by sacrificing cows. Accordingly, the Muslims of Champdany Jute Mills met together in the Champdany mosque . . . and decided not to . . . [sacrifice] any cows.'[57]

Sadly, such gestures were not always enough to buy security for the Muslims who made them. All too frequently, Hindus took the unbending view that Muslims no longer had the right under any circumstances whatsoever to perform cow-sacrifice. So when Muslims voluntarily, and in a considered and conciliatory way, gave up long-established rights to sacrifice cows, far from accepting this as an olive branch which required some *quid pro quo*, Hindus dismissed it merely as a sign that Muslims now knew their place. Instead, scenting victory, they seemed intent on forcing the issue to its ultimate outcome. In 1948 and 1949, time and again Muslims were threatened or attacked for daring to sacrifice cows even when there were well-established precedents for their being allowed to do so, and after they had taken every care not to offend sensibilities by performing the sacrifices well out of sight and earshot of Hindus.[58] Long after the West Bengal Animal Slaughter Control Act of 1950 laid down clear guidelines which permitted go-korbani at Id, provided it was done according to established precedent, with permission and in a private place,[59] the issue of cow-sacrifice continued to embitter Hindu–Muslim relations. In one typical case in 1959, on learning that a cow had been sold to a Muslim in a Purulia village before Bakr-Id, the local Hindus organised a public meeting 'with a view to discuss their future programme over the alleged cow slaughter'. The following day, the police visited the village to meet the leading members of both communities. 'The Hindus proposed that the Muslims should not slaughter cows any more in the village to which [a Muslim gentleman] who commands respect of the Muslims of the area agreed on behalf of local Muslims.'[60] In another case, Muslims of Bil Barail, who traditionally distributed beef in public at a mosque during Bakr-Id, were forced to give up the practice. In protest, they 'refrained from doing Korbani on Bakr-id day in that particular mosque'.[61] Step by

[57] S. D. P. O. Serampore's report dated 21 October 1947, GB IB File No. 167/47.
[58] GB IB File No. 69A-49 (Murshidabad).
[59] Government of West Bengal, Department of Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Forests, circular no. 8016-Vety, dated 25 June 1957, GB IB File No. 1802–57.
[60] Note of the SP DIB Purulia, dated 25 June 1959, GB IB File No. 1802/57(Part II). Again, the name has been withheld to protect anonymity as required by the Intelligence Branch in Calcutta.
[61] 'Situation report on the Bakr-Id festival in West Bengal', 20 June 1959, GB IB File No. 1802–57(Part II).

step, Muslims were thus persuaded, cajoled or forced to give up their rights to kill cows in localities where they had traditionally done so in the past.

The new Hindu mood of aggressive assertiveness soon spilled over to affect other Muslim public rituals. In June 1949, for instance, a dispute erupted in Kandi in Murshidabad between Muslims taking a *tazia* (bier) in licensed procession and Hindus who refused to allow them to prune branches of a sacred Hindu tree which prevented the tazia getting past. The Muslims had to back down, persuaded 'at a secret meeting' by one of their leaders that the 'authorities would redress their grievance in due course'.[62] Every outbreak of violence and rioting, whether in Bengal or further afield, was inevitably followed by the surrender by Muslims of more 'sacred space'. A police report on Calcutta's reaction to violence in Karachi and Jubbulpore in 1961, for instance, described 'a sense of panic among some sections of Muslims at Dilkhusa Street (Park Circus) and Kalabagan areas [of Calcutta]. These Muslims apprehend[ed] that Hindus may retaliate on them on the occasion of Holi ... S. M. Salahuddin contacted several Mohalla sardars of Phulbagan and Tantibagan in Beniapukur ... and instructed them to ask Muslims of these areas to remain quiet during the Holi festival.'[63] For Muslims to 'remain quiet' during Holi would have required them to allow noisy Hindu processions to pass their mosques without let or hindrance, giving up hard-won rights to silence while they were at prayer. Most Muslim graveyards in the city of Calcutta bear similar tidemarks of retreat and of defeat, as Hindu neighbours successfully challenged the right of Muslims to bury their dead and prevented them from observing rituals of death in their hallowed grounds.[64]

In these myriad ways, Muslims who stayed on in West Bengal after partition were gradually coerced or persuaded to surrender their traditional claims to public space and public ritual, and to retreat meekly into more mendicant postures. And once they had backed down, once a traditional right to sacred space or public ritual had been lost or undermined, there was no chance that it would ever be given back. A new 'precedent' had been 'established', there to be used against them in any

[62] WCR, Murshidabad district, for the week ending 6 November 1949, GB IB 69A/49 (Murshidabad).

[63] 'Repercussions in Calcutta of the incidents in Pakistan', SB note dated 1 March 1961, GB IB File No. 1278/59 (Part I).

[64] Author's interviews with Janab Mushtaque Hossain, Secretary, Muslim Burial Board, 27 May 1997, Calcutta; with Janab Syeed Munir at Gobra III burial ground, Calcutta, 27 May 1997; with Janab Nurul Hasan of the Anjuman Mufidul Islam, Calcutta, 3 June 1997. See also Joya Chatterji, 'Of graveyards and ghettos. Muslims in partitioned West Bengal, 1947–1967', in Mushirul Hasan and Asim Roy (eds.), *Living together separately. Cultural India in history and politics*, New Delhi, 2005.

future tussle. Anodyne narratives of 'cultural assimilation'[65] in the creation of a secular independent India tend to gloss over these rather harsher dynamics of intimidation and surrender, which are ugly but recurring themes in the same story.

Staying on: clustering and ghettoisation

It was not only the boundaries of sacred and ritual space that were re-drawn in the aftermath of partition. Partition set in train a process by which the physical space occupied by Muslims was progressively reduced and rearranged. It also accelerated the process, already underway long before 1947, by which the boundaries demarcating 'Muslim areas' from those of their Hindu neighbours came to be ever more sharply delineated. The combined effect of these twin developments was to push Muslims together into discrete, densely packed clusters or ghettos.

In many ways, this 'clustering' and 'ghettoisation' of Muslims reflected the realities of the new Bengal, and the limitations and constraints within which ordinary Muslims tried to survive the traumas of partition. During riots, flight was the only option for many Muslims, particularly for those who lived in areas where they were overwhelmingly outnumbered by Hindus who wanted to drive them out. Whether these fleeing Muslims escaped to Pakistan or merely sought shelter in safer areas in West Bengal, each exodus resulted in Muslims losing property to the dominant community. Scores of Muslims left their homes in fear of their lives during riots with the hope of returning once normalcy was restored; their flight was intended as a temporary retreat, not as a permanent departure. But all too often experience belied these expectations. Notwithstanding the agreements between India and Pakistan that evacuee property in Bengal was to be held in trust until its rightful owners came back,[66] Muslim refugees were not able to repossess their homes, since in their absence their property had been grabbed by Hindus. And despite Prafulla Chakrabarti's protestations to the contrary, it is abundantly clear that the new possessors were more often than not Hindu refugees from East Bengal.[67]

[65] For an introduction to the debates about the politics of 'assimilation' of minorities, see Will Kymlicka (ed.), *The rights of minority cultures*, Oxford, 1995.

[66] The Evacuee Properties Act of 1951 stated that 'a migrant Muslim family from West Bengal, returning by 31 March 1951, would be entitled to reoccupy the deserted property'.

[67] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 105–8. His insistence that the plight of Muslim refugees was no 'great calamity in the midst of such misery' reveals the same unattractive prejudice and mindset which lay behind the government's failure even to attempt to record the number of displaced Muslims, and which mars his otherwise fine work.

Police files bear eloquent testimony to the hostile reception which met Muslims who dared to return and asked to be given back their property. In August 1950, for instance, almost four months after the riots in Howrah, the police reported that Hindu refugees who had grabbed Muslim-owned homes during the violence refused to give them back to their rightful owners, drumming up threats of communal retaliation to bolster their unlawful stand.[68] In 1951, the census superintendent made a telling comment on how certain wards of Calcutta had already been transformed as a result of such developments:

> Sukea Street, Colootola, Fenwick Bazar, Mainktola, Belliaghat, Belgachia and Cossipur wards used to contain mixed population of Hindus and Muslims before the riots of January and February 1950. During the riots most of the *bustees* [tenements] were deserted and many empty hutments were later gutted by fire by hooligans. Between December 1950 and March 1951 almost all these deserted areas were rehabilitated and filled up by large settlements of Displaced Hindus from East Bengal in certain wards and large blocks of resettled Muslims from various parts of the city and Howrah in others. *They finally sorted out no more in mixed but clear-cut blocks of communities.*[69]

This process of 'unmixing', as it has been described,[70] was not limited to the densely populated wards of the city. In a typical incident on the rural Nadia border, 'Muslims returning from Pakistan with their families and personal effects' in the aftermath of riots were fallen upon and robbed by a gang of thirty or forty refugee thugs and driven away from the village. 'They were forced to take shelter with the Muslims' of the neighbouring village of Sonadanga.[71] Yet they were not safe even with their Muslim neighbours. On 23 August 1950, five Muslims in Sonadanga were forcibly driven out by Hindu refugees and such possessions as they still had were looted. As the police report explained:

> After the migration to Pakistan of the Muslims of this village about 5,000 Hindu refugees have been living here after occupying the Muslim houses either by virtue of documents of exchange or finding them vacant. The return of Muslims almost

[68] According to the report, 'a tense feeling is prevailing amongst the East Bengal refugees of the district who are residing in vacant Muslim houses over the question of their ejectment as many of the Muslim house owners have since returned and started cases [under section] 448 IPC. The refugees are trying to gain public sympathy on their behalf. Their eviction would not be an easy task unless they are rehabilitated elsewhere': Report on the political activities of the refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 20.8.1950, GB IB File No. 1838–48 (KW).

[69] *Census of India 1951*, vol. VI, part III, p. xiv (emphasis added).

[70] I have borrowed this vivid phrase from Aristide Zolberg, who used it in his memorable address on the subject of refugees and asylum-seekers at the British Academy in 2005.

[71] Report of D/C Kotwali PS dated 25 August 1950, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

daily in large numbers has caused great commotion among the refugees who are unwilling to accommodate them.[72]

This was just one example of how Muslims returning home found that in their absence whole colonies of Hindu refugees had settled on their lands and taken over their houses.[73] Once refugees had squatted on Muslim land with the support of neighbourhood bosses and their bully boys, it was virtually impossible to drive them out.[74] In April 1950, a meeting was held at Hanskhali under the 'presidentship of Bikash Roy (Congress) [at which] he urged the refugees not to vacate Muslim houses occupied by them, nor to allow any Muslim to enter there'. That same month, police reported that a volunteer group had been formed, ominously calling itself the Santan Bahini,[75] with the stated goal of preventing Muslims from returning to their homes. Without connections and without a countervailing force to back them, Muslims were powerless to do anything about it. Those who returned in the hope of re-entering their homes after riots had ended thus had no choice but to return to Pakistan or to seek refuge in Muslim-majority areas in West Bengal where there was some safety in numbers. Even when the Muslims who returned were men of standing, ready to lodge complaints with the police against the Hindu refugees who had grabbed their property, they too found that they could not get it back because the refugees were well organised, had established political connections and were determined to stand their ground.[76]

Patterns of Muslim settlement and land ownership were changed in other and more openly aggressive ways. Often Muslims who had chosen to stay on in their homes during riots and to brave the furies of the mob were physically driven out of their homes. Once again, Hindu refugees were among the lead players in these incidents of intimidation and expropriation. Most cases of forcible eviction occurred in border districts such as Nadia where refugees settled in large numbers on the property of Muslim evacuees and then tried to capture even more land by intimidating the few remaining Muslim families and forcing them also to quit. In

[72] Report on the political activities of the refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 3.9.1950, GB IB File No. 1838–48 (KW).

[73] In Nakashipara, near the Nadia border, Muslims found that Namasudra refugees had built over a hundred huts on their land in Radhanagar and Birpur: extract from abstract dated 6 May 1950, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

[74] *Ibid.*

[75] The volunteers in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's famous political novel, *Ananadamath*, called themselves *santan* or 'children' of the motherland. Used in the context of post-partition Bengal, the term evoked disturbing images of anti-Muslim vigilante behaviour.

[76] In July 1950, for instance, a group of policemen in Cossimbazar was attacked when it 'tried to eject refugees from a house belonging to a member of the minority community': *Hindusthan Standard*, 5 July 1950.

September 1950, in one such instance, about fifty Namasudra refugees who had settled at Paikpara near Krishnaganj in Nadia entered the Muslim sector of the village and 'asked' the Muslims to leave in order to make room for Hindu evacuees from East Pakistan. Overnight they put up huts on Muslim-owned land 'with the object of compelling the landowners to settle the lands with them'.[77] In another incident on 25 December 1950, about a hundred refugee families forced their way in the middle of the night into the house of a Muslim of Nowdapur in Tehatta, beat him up and attacked the other Muslims in the village, 'and commanded them to go away to Pakistan leaving all their properties'.[78] Nadia witnessed the worst of these incidents, but they were not uncommon throughout the long rural borderlands of West Bengal.[79]

There was little the overstretched rural policemen could do to protect the Muslims, even when they were minded to help (which usually they were not).[80] In outlying rural border areas, state authority was in any

[77] Report on the political activities of the refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 18.9.1949, GB IB File No. 1838–48 (Part III).

[78] Copy of radiogram message from O/C Tehatta PS dated 26 December 1950, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

[79] In May 1950, police commented on 'a general tendency amongst the Namasudra evacuees, settled recently near Bongaon, to terrorise the Muslim residents of the Indian Union so that they may go away to East Pakistan by exchanging their houses and properties': Report on the political activities of the refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 7.5.1950, GB IB File No. 1838–48 (IV).

[80] One grave incident in Ranaghat graphically reflects this predicament. On 25 June 1950, a group of six policemen was on its way to three Muslim villages in Ranaghat in response to a complaint that cattle belonging to Muslims had been stolen by Hindu refugees. The brave sextet of constables and their inspectors was met by a crowd of 'one thousand to fifteen hundred refugees' carrying *lathis* (bamboo staves), marching ominously towards the Muslim villages. 'From a distance of 150 cubits roughly, the S[ub] I[nspector] Nepal Mukherjee challenged the crowd to stop and to explain why they were proceeding in such an unusual manner and so armed. In answer to this challenge some members of the mob reported that they would go to Purbanagar village and Khagradanga but they did not halt to explain any further. These two villages [were] thick Muslim pockets. The S[ub] I[nspector] suspected that the mob was marching with [the] obvious purpose of looting the properties of the Muslims. He further shouted at the mob to halt giving them due warning. The mob did not show any sign of changing their attitude. The S[ub] I[nspector] then asked his men to load their rifles and take position. The mob became aggressive and one of them dashed against the S[ub] I[nspector]. This man was immediately arrested. At this the mob fell out in batches to round up the small police party. No alternative was then left to the police party but to open fire to protect their rifles and their lives . . . The mob then retreated a few steps back and then reorganised there for fresh attack. Five shots were then fired . . . [which] wounded one man. The mob then became puzzled and fled carrying the wounded man in hot haste in different directions in the heavy rains. The police party then chased them and succeeded in arresting three others . . . The police party tried to trace the wounded man but with no result. They got help from none in the village as the inhabitants there [were] all refugees. There is no rural police, the village en bloc being deserted by the Muslims some time back': 'Report of enquiry into the firing opened by the police against a riotous mob on 25 June 1950', GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

event thinly spread and deeply compromised; and the police, usually complicit in this bullying and harassment, gave Muslims little protection. For their part, Muslims sometimes tried to put up resistance, whether by fighting back[81] or by forging factional alliances with local Hindus, who did not like the incursions of refugees and their disregard for the rights of property or the rule of law.[82] Sometimes Muslims went so far as to hire Hindu mercenaries to protect them.[83] But as innumerable abandoned Muslim villages throughout West Bengal graphically testify, these efforts had little success. In Nadia, as we have seen, something akin to a total exchange of population between India and Pakistan took place. But in other parts, many Muslims forced to leave their lands chose not to go to Pakistan and instead sought sanctuary in other Muslim-dominated areas in West Bengal, on the Indian side of the border.

Over time, as each incident of rioting and tension sparked off an exodus of frightened and vulnerable Muslims fleeing to safer areas, and as each temporary flight became a permanent exile, Muslim communities which had been large and well established before partition now disappeared altogether or shrank into tiny clusters. Particularly in the towns and cities of southern West Bengal, where Muslims had once played a prominent part in urban life, now they huddled together in small areas, hemmed in by colonies of Hindu refugees that sprang up around them. These tiny Muslim 'pockets', surrounded and continually squeezed by hostile neighbours, became increasingly crowded little enclaves with the distinctive air of the ghetto about them.[84]

In another related but contrasting trend, rural areas still dominated by Muslims, chiefly in northern Bengal, gradually absorbed larger and larger numbers of Muslims who had been displaced from other parts of the state.

[81] At Kalupur beside the Ichhamati river, a pitched battle was fought between the Muslims of Kalabhas village, 'exclusively a Muslim pocket', and the 'Kalupur people who are exclusively Namasudra refugees'. Unusually, the outcome was that refugees attempting to loot the Muslim village were beaten back by Muslims 'armed with *lathis*, *sharkis* [arrows] and other weapons': Report of the SDO Ranaghat on the Kalupur incident of 2 September 1950, U/S 148/355 IPC, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

[82] In one incident in Nadia in June 1950, when refugees of the Dhubulia camp attacked Muslims of Hansadanga village, 'the Muslims resisted and were assisted by the goalas [caste of milkmen] of Hansadanga. The refugees were beaten back . . . On returning to the camp the refugees spread rumours that they had been attacked by Muslims without any provocations and that two of them had been killed.' This led to widespread looting and burning of Muslim homes and property, even though the refugees 'met with organised resistance from the goalas': extract from abstract dated 10 June 1950, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

[83] Note dated 19 April 1950, GB IB File No. 1238/47 (Cooch Behar).

[84] See, for instance, Mahadev Basu's *Anthropological profile of the Muslims of Calcutta* (Anthropological Survey of India), Calcutta, 1985, based on field work conducted in 1973 and 1974.

Already recognisable as 'Muslim belts' before 1947, after partition they came to be more densely settled and more exclusively Muslim in their composition. As the census commissioner observed in 1961, the Muslim population in these belts had grown rapidly since 1947, at a rate considerably faster than the population of the state as a whole. In Malda, for instance, Muslim numbers increased by 63 per cent in the decade between 1951 and 1961. In West Dinajpur, the Muslim population grew by 51 per cent in the same period; in Birbhum growth was 39 per cent and in Murshidabad 35 per cent. The commissioner typically attributed this remarkable growth 'to the greater fecundity amongst them', falling back on entrenched stereotypes of rapidly breeding Muslims. But, as even he had to admit in an aside, it was in no small measure a consequence of immigrant Muslims 'from East Pakistan and elsewhere' coming into these areas.[85]

This passing reference to Muslim immigrants 'from East Pakistan' draws attention to another phenomenon which has escaped attention hitherto. This was the significant social trend of reverse migration of Muslims moving from East Pakistan into West Bengal. The evidence suggests that many Muslim evacuees who came back to India from East Pakistan but found it impossible to return home tended to go and settle instead in these Muslim-dominated belts. Despite the lofty aims of the Inter-Dominion Agreement of 1948 between India and Pakistan which encouraged Bengali refugees on both sides of the border to return home, Muslim evacuees found that in reality every obstacle was placed in their way, and that the authorities, far from helping them, quite unashamedly strove to keep them out.[86] In

[85] *1961 Census*, p. 223.

[86] Directives from Delhi, in contrast to some official pronouncements, showed that the government did not want Muslims to return to India. In May 1949, the secretary at the Ministry of Rehabilitation in Delhi wrote to the chief secretary of the West Bengal government about the government of India's 'considerable anxiety' about the working of the permit system. 'The permit system was introduced with a view to stop one-way traffic from Pakistan as the return of such Muslims was adversely affecting the rehabilitation schemes of the Government of India. Despite our request (dated 14 December 1948) that the applications for the conversion of a temporary permit into a permanent one by Muslims who came to India after 10 September 1948 should not be entertained, we are informed by our High Commissioner in Pakistan that a large number of such recommendations are being received by him ... In this connection I am to draw your attention to my letter ... of 18 April 1949 in which you were requested not to recommend cases for the grants of permits for permanent settlement to Muslim evacuees except in cases of genuine hardship. As you are presumably aware we have over 7 lacs [lakhs] of displaced people receiving free rations in camps in India. The Government of India attaches great importance to their early rehabilitation ... Return of Muslims from Pakistan is bound to [retard] the rehabilitation of displaced persons. In the circumstances it is hoped the Provincial Governments will not allow permits for permanent settlement to Muslims wishing to come back to India till the displaced persons have been satisfactorily rehabilitated': C. N. Chandra, Secretary, Government of India, Ministry of

consequence, this reverse migration tended to be clandestine, and, until the mid-1970s, no one had the full picture or tried to assess its scale. But the one run of the Secret Fortnightly Reports for 1957 which survives in the archives shows beyond a doubt that every fortnight Muslim families entered West Bengal by stealth and settled in places where there were already large concentrations of their co-religionists.[87]

That the process began soon after partition is suggested by reports from Malda, a northern border district with a large Muslim presence. As early as 1949, the police noticed that Muslims from East Bengal were trickling into Malda at the rate of one or two families a week. Despite the fact that 'suitable steps [had] been and [were] being taken to discourage such migration', this slow, surreptitious but insidious dribble went on, in particular into the Muslim-dominated Kaliachak area along the border.[88] That these migrants were usually absorbed by the existing Muslim communities of Malda is supported by an undercover officer's finding in 1949 that 'the Muslims who [were] coming to this dominion [were] facing very [few] difficulties to settle, as they [were] being helped by their community to settle . . . [and were] not begging for help from anyone else or from the Government'.[89] Most of these people, in the officer's view, were Muslim evacuees who had decided to come back, although some were Muslim 'destitutes' and 'economic migrants' from East Bengal who thought they might do better on the Indian side of the border.[90]

These findings have an important implication. They suggest that some of these Muslim reverse migrants who crept into the Muslim belts in the late 1940s and 1950s originally came from *other* parts of West Bengal. Instead of going back home (where their land in all probability had been appropriated by Hindu squatters), they now resettled, with the assistance of the local Muslims, in safer Muslim-majority areas clustered along the

Rehabilitation, to the Chief Secretary, Government of West Bengal, 9 May 1949, GB IB File No. 1210–48(4). This rap on the knuckles was followed by another stern reminder from New Delhi on 6 June 1948: *ibid.*

87 The 'infiltration of Muslims into Indian territory without travel documents' was reported fortnight after fortnight throughout 1957 from the border districts – from the 24 Parganas, Nadia, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Murshidabad and Malda. Towards the end of the year, cases were regularly reported from these districts of Pakistani Muslims being prosecuted for 'illegal entry' and for 'violation of passport rules'. In the first half of November 1957, twenty-one Pakistani Muslims were charged in West Dinajpur with 'violation of the passport rules while in Jalpaiguri eight of them were prosecuted for the same offence. In Cooch Behar certain Pakistani Muslims . . . [were charged with] illegal entry': SFR for the first half of November 1957 for West Bengal, *ibid.*

88 WCR for the week ending 31 December 1949, GB IB File No. 69A/49 (Malda).

89 Copy of a report by the DIO(I) of Nadia district dated 12 August 1949, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

90 *Ibid.*

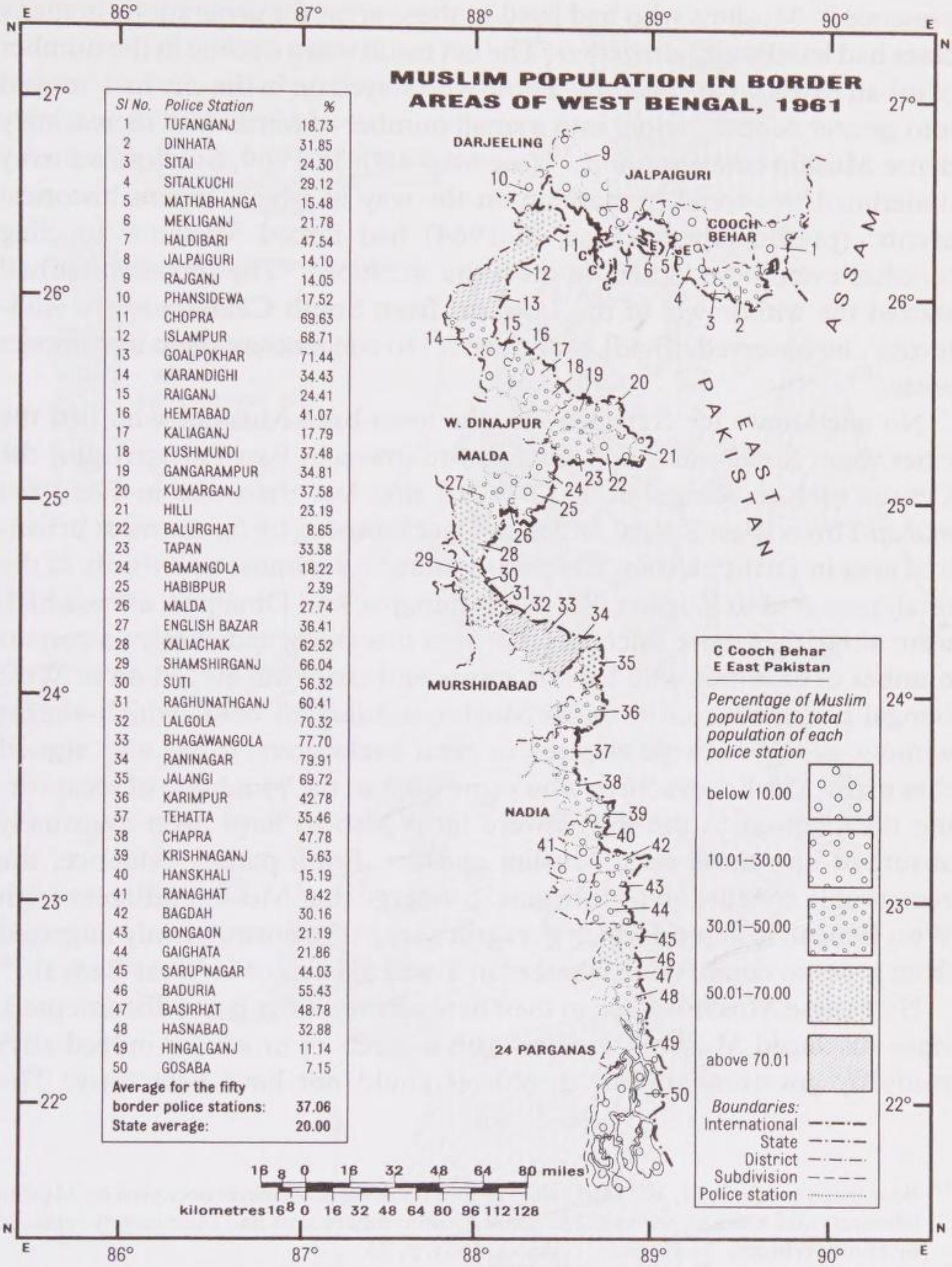
rural border. This peculiar migration is one factor which explains the phenomenal increase in size and density of the populations living in these Muslim belts, particularly those nearest to India's borders with Pakistan.

The overall result of these shifts in patterns of Muslim settlement can be seen in the striking fact that, by 1961, about 30 per cent of West Bengal's Muslims were crowded together in only fifty thanas along the border with East Pakistan (see map 4.2). In this handful of localities, by 1961 the number of Muslims had increased to about 40 per cent of the total population. Their presence was particularly significant in three distinct zones of 'particularly strong concentration, each consisting of a chain of contiguous border police stations'.[91] In the border thanas of West Dinajpur, Malda-Murshidabad and the 24 Parganas, Muslims comprised between half and four-fifths of the total population. Significantly, Kaliachak, where the first instance of this reverse migration was discovered in 1949, was one of these three zones, and by 1961 Muslims constituted over 65 per cent of its total population.

This clustering effect could also be seen, albeit less markedly, in other districts where there had been Muslim communities before partition. In 1931, just over a quarter of Birbhum's inhabitants had been Muslims. By 1961, the Muslims of Birbhum had clustered together in the north of the district and had become the majority community there. By contrast, in south Birbhum, their numbers had shrunk to less than one in ten of the local population. It was as if partition violently shook the complex kaleidoscopes of Bengali Muslim society, creating new shapes and patterns of settlement. All over West Bengal, but particularly in the urban south, Muslims left places where they had lived previously in small communities and moved into areas, mainly in the rural north and along the border, where the community had always had a sizeable presence. The consequence was that small Muslim localities shrank or disappeared altogether, and the large Muslim concentrations became larger, more densely populated and more exclusively the preserve of this threatened minority. This was a development of huge potential significance; yet before now it has not been identified or commented upon by those who have studied Bengal after partition.

One outcome of this series of successive displacements and shifts, it has already been noted, was a sharp fall in the number of Muslims living in the towns and cities of West Bengal. More town-dwelling Muslims

[91] These zones were Chopra-Islampur-Goalpokhar in West Dinajpur, Kaliachak-Shamshirganj-Suti-Raghunathganj-Lalgola-Bhagawangola-Raninagar-Jalangi-Karimpur in Malda and Murshidabad, and Sarupnagar-Baduria-Basirhat in the 24 Parganas: *1961 Census*, p. 222.



Sl No.	Police Station	%
1	TUFANGANJ	18.73
2	DINHATA	31.85
3	SITAI	24.30
4	SITALKUCHI	29.12
5	MATHABHANGA	15.48
6	MEKLIGANJ	21.78
7	HALDIBARI	47.54
8	JALPAIGURI	14.10
9	RAJGANJ	14.05
10	PHANSIDEWA	17.52
11	CHOPRA	69.63
12	ISLAMPUR	68.71
13	GOALPOKHAR	71.44
14	KARANDIGHI	34.43
15	RAIGANJ	24.41
16	HEMTABAD	41.07
17	KALIAGANJ	17.79
18	KUSHMUNDI	37.48
19	GANGARAMPUR	34.81
20	KUMARGANJ	37.58
21	HILLI	23.19
22	BALURGHAT	8.65
23	TAPAN	33.38
24	BAMANGOLA	18.22
25	HABIBPUR	2.39
26	MALDA	27.74
27	ENGLISH BAZAR	36.41
28	KALIACHAK	62.52
29	SHAMSHIRGANJ	66.04
30	SUTI	56.32
31	RAGHUNATHGANJ	60.41
32	LALGOLA	70.32
33	BHAGAWANGOLA	77.70
34	RANINAGAR	79.91
35	JALANGI	69.72
36	KARIMPUR	42.78
37	TEHATTA	35.46
38	CHAPRA	47.78
39	KRISHNAGANJ	5.63
40	HANSKHALI	15.19
41	RANAGHAT	8.42
42	BAGDAH	30.16
43	BONGAON	21.19
44	GAIGHATA	21.86
45	SARUPNAGAR	44.03
46	BADURIA	55.43
47	BASIRHAT	48.78
48	HASNABAD	32.88
49	HINGALGANJ	11.14
50	GOSABA	7.15
Average for the fifty border police stations:		**37.06**
State average:		**20.00**

4.2 Muslim police stations along the India–East Pakistan border, 1961 (*Census of India 1961*, vol. XVI, part I-A, book (i)).

left home in the aftermath of partition than did their rural counterparts. In 1964, the year of his survey of Calcutta, Nirmal Kumar Bose found that in many wards and *mohallas* which once had been Muslim preserves refugees had edged the Muslims out and established a dominant Hindu

presence.[92] Muslims who had lived in these areas for generations in many cases had left the city altogether. The net result was a decline in the number of urban Muslims in Calcutta. Those who stayed on in the city had 'moved into greater concentration' into a small number of wards with increasingly dense Muslim concentrations[93] (see map 4.3). In 1969, Siddiqui's survey underlined this trend, remarking on the way in which 'recent historical events' (presumably the riots of 1964) had forced Muslims 'to cling together even more closely to meet the situation'. 'The process that had started the withdrawal of the Muslims from South Calcutta in the mid-forties', he observed, '[had] continued . . . to concentrate them in compact areas.'[94]

No one knows for certain where the town-bred Muslims who fled the cities went. Some must have migrated to towns in East Pakistan. But the Census of East Bengal in 1951 found that less than one in every ten *muhajirs* from West Bengal settled in Dacca district, by far the most urbanised area in East Pakistan. Far greater numbers, almost two-thirds of the total, migrated to Kushtia, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Dinajpur, areas which were altogether more bucolic.[95] And, as this study had shown, a certain number of Muslims who left the towns and cities but stayed on in West Bengal had gravitated towards Muslim-dominated belts, which almost without exception were situated in rural backwaters; it has also argued that many Muslim evacuees who came back in the vain hope of recapturing their homes in the towns were likely also to have been eventually absorbed into these rural Muslim clusters. From patchy evidence, the remarkable conclusion thus begins to emerge that Muslim refugees from West Bengal, in a trend which goes contrary to the norm, mainly migrated from town to countryside whether in East Pakistan or in West Bengal.[96]

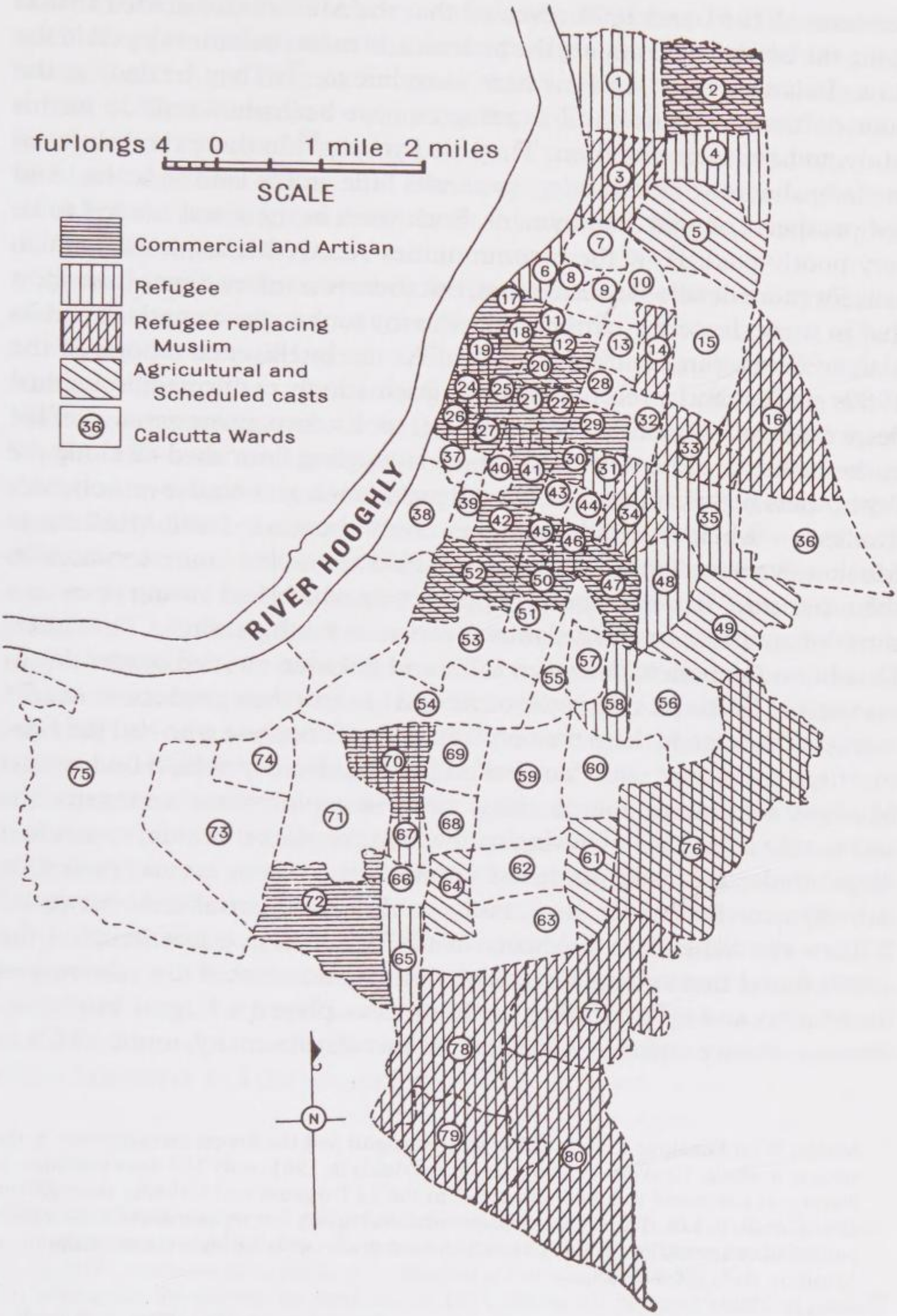
How these Muslims fared in their new surroundings is not documented, since displaced Muslims were not the subjects of much (or indeed any) study by government. But their lives could not have been easy. The

[92] Bose listed wards 3, 14, 16, 34, 77, 78, 79 and 80 as areas formerly occupied by Muslim labourers and artisans, where the original Muslim inhabitants had been largely replaced by Hindu refugees: N. K. Bose, *Calcutta: 1964*, p. 33.

[93] *Ibid.*, pp. 39–40. [94] Siddiqui, *The Muslims of Calcutta*, p. 26.

[95] *Census of Pakistan 1951*, vol. III, p. 81.

[96] If this could be established more securely it would be highly significant, since every study of migration in South Asia insists that its main directions have been cityward. Historically people in South Asia have mainly moved from villages to cities; smaller numbers have moved from one town to another or, in a few cases, from one rural area to another. That migration in Bengal followed this usual pattern is demonstrated in Chattopadhyaya, *Internal migration in India*. Migration from towns to villages is an almost unheard-of phenomenon. And yet this is what West Bengal Muslims appear to have done in large numbers after 1947.



4.3 Calcutta wards where Hindu refugees replaced Muslim inhabitants, 1964 (N. K. Bose, *Calcutta: 1964. A social survey*, Bombay, New Delhi, Calcutta and Madras, 1968).

censuses of 1961 and 1971 revealed that the Muslim-dominated thanas along the border were among the poorest and most underdeveloped in the state. Relatively few Muslims here were literate.[97] They tended, as the poor do the world over and as refugees have been shown to do in this study, to have many children. They died young.[98] In these rural slums in the long shadow of the border, there was little arable land to be had and few prospects of paid employment. Such work as there was tended to be very poorly paid. How these communities survived is a question which calls for more detailed investigation, but there is some evidence to suggest that in these desperate circumstances many took to crime and, in particular, to dealing in contraband goods. As the intelligence reports of the 1950s suggest and a recent study has fascinatingly confirmed, individual desperados and sometimes entire villages took to smuggling as a way of life in the badlands of the borders. In fact, smuggling flourished all along the dry borders between East and West Bengal, not least because most border dwellers – whether Hindu refugees from the east, local Muslims or Muslim evacuees and returnees from Pakistan – had some contacts on the other side. It was a door of opportunity which had swung open at a time when partition had slammed so many others shut. The Inter-Dominion Agreements between India and Pakistan entitled border dwellers to cross from one side to the other and to carry their produce to nearby markets. This made them the only nationals of one state who had the right to enter the other with 'controlled' goods. Border folk, Hindus and Muslims alike, were able in many cases to exploit these arrangements, and to take advantage of having connections on the other side, to conduct illegal trade in locally produced commodities, or to act as 'mules' or deliverymen for wider and more ambitious contraband networks. Willem van Schendel's fieldwork in the Bangladesh borderlands in the 1990s found that smuggling overwhelmingly dominated the economy of these areas and that Muslims on both sides played a large – but by no means exclusive – part in it.[99] Much of this illegal activity, in the 1950s as

[97] Malda, West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri had the lowest literacy levels in the state as a whole. Of every 10,000 persons in Malda in 1961, only 165 were recorded as literate, as compared to 1,995 and 1,697 in the 24 Parganas and Calcutta respectively: *1961 Census*, p. 110. The tables showing rural and urban literacy per thana show a clear pattern of extremely low levels of literacy in rural thanas with the highest concentration of Muslims: *ibid.*, pp. 116–18.

[98] *Ibid.*, p. 223.

[99] Willem van Schendel, 'Easy come, easy go. Smugglers on the Ganges', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 23, 2 (1993); van Schendel, 'Working through partition. Making a living in the Bengal borderlands', *International Review of Social History*, 46 (2001); and van Schendel, *The Bengal borderland. Beyond state and nation in South Asia*, London, 2005. See also J. Chatterji, 'The fashioning of a frontier'.

in the 1990s, seems to have been conducted as a means of survival and in a spirit of opportunism rather than a deliberate subversion of the law. But smuggling did not help to integrate these communities into the mainstream of West Bengal's social and political life. Instead, as van Schendel has shown, they were increasingly tied into social and economic networks with transnational allies and shadowy paymasters whose influence straddled the border, and over whom the writ of Calcutta, let alone that of New Delhi, did not run.

Those Muslims who stayed on in the cities also found their conditions of life fundamentally transformed, although in different ways. They now lived in cramped ghettos filled to overflowing alongside fellow Muslims from other, more dangerous parts of the city. The urban Muslim communities which in the early part of the century had been 'distinct sub-communal groups', became more ethnically diverse as they absorbed co-religionists who belonged to a variety of ethnic groups, who had lived by different crafts and who followed different sects. Basu's study of Muslim *bustees* or slums in Calcutta in 1974 reveals that very few of the old communities survived these traumatic changes intact,[100] one casualty being their hereditary trades and the status associated with them. Not a single Ansari, Basu discovered, was still a weaver in 1974; most now made *bidis*, or country cigarettes, or scratched a living from pulling rickshaws, hawking fish or taking jobs as dockworkers or *lascars*. In 1974, hardly any Raiens still sold vegetables, and Sisgars to a man had given up their traditional craft of making bangles.[101] Of course some of these people had done well by changing occupation, a few even joining the ranks of the petty bourgeoisie: some Ansaris and Raiens managed to get an education for themselves and entered the lower rungs of the professions. But for most of these artisans, the loss of their old local bases, old patrons and old ways of life, which for so many urban Muslims had revolved around their mastery of hereditary crafts, reduced them to a life of poverty.[102] Many were simply pushed to the bottom of the heap, joining the swelling ranks of day labourers and the unemployed.[103]

100 M. Basu, *Anthropological profile of the Muslims of Calcutta*, p. 5. See also M. K. A. Siddiqui, 'Life in the slums of Calcutta', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 13 December 1969.

101 M. Basu, *Anthropological profile of the Muslims of Calcutta*, pp. 14–15.

102 Among the Sheikhjees, for instance, in 1974 almost 80 per cent clung on to their hereditary calling as traders in cattle and dairy produce, but one in five had taken up 'hard manual labour': *ibid.*, p. 16.

103 For a description of the grinding poverty in which many of these communities still live to this day, see M. K. A. Siddiqui (ed.), *Marginal Muslim communities in India*, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 263–436.

In summary, partition dramatically changed the profile of the Muslim population of West Bengal. They were flung out of the cities and towns of the south, where they had been embedded for generations, and scattered northwards to the rural Muslim settlements near the border and beyond. This cataclysm helped to erase some of the time-worn differences between Muslims of the west of Bengal, historically urban in composition, and their rural co-religionists in eastern Bengal. It was almost as if the larger partition of Bengal had sparked off an endless series of lesser partitions in the innumerable neighbourhoods of the west, the Great Divide being mirrored in many smaller divisions which altered the communal topography of a rapidly changing province. Partition increased the physical distances separating Hindus from Muslims and rendered more impermeable the boundaries between them. Once-prosperous Muslim settlements turned into slum-like ghettos of the underprivileged. In these sad communities, those who were too poor and too disadvantaged to migrate to Pakistan were now the predominant presence. But in these ghettos other ominous trends began to emerge. As the status of their residents declined and prolonged social isolation deepened the gulf which separated Muslims from Bengal's other citizens, the sense of alienation of the ghetto-dwellers from the new polity grew ever more intense; and this would come to constitute one of the threats to the stability of the new state of West Bengal.

Clusters, ghettos and the new 'Muslim politics'

In time, these social and economic changes significantly affected the politics of these Muslim clusters. A commonplace of political science is that after partition India's Muslim minorities gave their allegiance to the ruling Congress party, becoming one of its most stable and reliable 'vote banks'. Yet no one has actually studied Muslim political behaviour in detail to see whether this was indeed the case. The evidence from West Bengal, fragmentary and partial though it is, suggests a rather more complex, and changing, picture of Muslim political reactions and affiliations. Of course, the lack of written sources from which the intentions of ordinary people can be reliably inferred is a serious handicap to discovering what Muslim expectations were at the time of partition. Some like to see an element of 'nationalist' political commitment in the decision of so many ordinary Bengali Muslims to stay on in India, or indeed to return to India after seeking temporary shelter in East Pakistan. But to assume that the decision not to settle in Pakistan is a reliable guide to the political views of West Bengal's Muslims would be an assumption as unsafe as the sweeping conclusion that those who stayed on were by

definition inclined to support the Congress or were in some sense 'secular' Muslims.[104]

What is known is that some Muslim politicians saw the sense of winding up the Muslim League and joining the Congress, and conversely that the Congress Assembly party had good reason to welcome Muslims into its ranks. After partition, once independent India had decided that separate electorates must go,[105] currying favour with voters in areas where Muslims tended to live in clusters made eminently good electoral sense. Already in June 1948, secret police in Nadia reported that 'prospective MLAs [were] trying to pave their own fields which necessarily involves too much of hobnobbing with Muslims'.[106] This was confirmed by police reports from Murshidabad, where it was discovered that 'some prospective candidates (congressites) [*sic*]' were reportedly 'trying to placate the Muslims to ensure their success under [the] joint electorate system'.[107] As the superintendent of police (intelligence) for Nadia explained,

> This district, on the date of partition, had a majority of Muslim population. There has been a reversal of this position by the influx of Hindu population from East Bengal. These evacuees are but a floating population on whom the seekers of election cannot reasonably count. They therefore have concentrated on the Muslim inhabitants to extend their influence over them. Naturally, there has been a growing propensity amongst them to placate the Muslims and to enlist their sympathy and support. There has been evidence of undue requests at official quarters in favour of these people and from such people.[108]

For their part, in the early years after independence, large numbers of Bengali Muslims did support Congress at the hustings, as the elections of 1952 show. In these elections, candidates with Congress tickets swept the polls in most constituencies which contained large numbers of Muslim voters. Indeed, in 1952, being given a Congress ticket was the surest way to success for a Muslim politician. In that year, eighty-three Muslims stood for election to the Assembly. Twenty-one stood on Congress tickets, fourteen were put up by the opposition parties and forty-five stood as independents. Seventeen of the twenty-one Muslims on Congress tickets won their

[104] Some Muslims in Murshidabad, who before partition had backed the Muslim League and the demand for Pakistan, saw no reason to cross over to the east after it: Rahman and van Schendel, '"I am *not* a refugee"'.

[105] The Constituent Assembly debated the report on minority rights on 28 August 1947 and voted to abandon separate electorates: *CAD* V–VII, pp. 277–99. See also chapter 2.

[106] Extract from a memo by DIG Police Barrackpore dated 29 June 1948, GB IB File No. 1238–47 (Nabadwip).

[107] SP DIB Murshidabad to Special Superintendent of Police, Intelligence Branch, 16 July 1948, *ibid.*

[108] SP DIB Nadia to Special Superintendent of Police, Intelligence Branch, 28 July 1948, *ibid.*

seats: in other words, four in five. In contrast, only two independent Muslims won seats in the Assembly, and not a single Muslim was returned to the Assembly on an opposition party ticket.[109] One Muslim politician, admittedly a Congressman himself, explained this outcome by arguing that Muslims, originally wary of the Congress, had eventually 'veered round and agreed with us that in the secular constitution of India laid down by the Congress lies our greatest safety and if [the] Congress did nothing but give us this secular constitution it was enough for us and we would stand by the Congress'.[110] Others offered a more sceptical explanation, suggesting that the key motive driving Muslims to vote for the Congress was 'the lurking fear that the[ir] being in the minority . . . would lose Congress patronage'.[111]

This does not, however, mean that Muslims voted *en bloc* for the Congress in the 1952 elections or that they had become a single and solid 'vote bank' in West Bengal. The many Muslims who stood as independents or as candidates of other parties shows that such an assumption would be wrong. The shift towards the Congress was by no means a universal trend among Muslims. Nor were those in the Congress camp all of a like mind in their attitudes towards Muslims. Wooing Muslims where they were numerous was often a matter of cynical calculation rather than genuine commitment to minority rights, and Muslims, for their part, did not always fall for the wiles of their newfound friends. Especially where their would-be champions had a past record of Muslim-baiting, Muslims were not always minded to let bygones be bygones, as can be seen in the case of Sasanka Sekhar Sanyal, a politician who had been a notorious champion of Hindu causes before partition,[112] and who was booted out by Murshidabad's Muslims when he stood as the RSP's candidate from Behrampore in 1952.[113] The Muslims who opposed the Congress in 1952 themselves were not in any sense a united force either. In nine constituencies, more than one independent Muslim candidate stood for election. In the Bharatpur constituency of Murshidabad, four independent Muslims fought each other in a seven-sided contest. In Sagardighi (also in Murshidabad) two independent Muslims stood against each other, and in Raniganj also two independents fought each other as well as a third Muslim candidate who had decided to run on a Congress ticket.[114]

[109] Figures calculated from Dilip Banerjee, *Election recorder*, part I, *West Bengal, 1952–1987*, Calcutta, 1990.

[110] Ansaruddin Ahmed, ex-President, Cooch Behar District Congress Committee to Dr B. C. Roy, 3 June 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

[111] Sailesh Chandra Sinha to General Secretary, AICC, 2 August 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

[112] J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, p. 146. [113] D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*, p. 10.

[114] The details for the different constituencies can all be found in *ibid*.

Nor, by itself, was support for the Congress at the hustings proof that Muslim voters had become 'Congress-minded' or 'secular' in their political sentiments. As in the bad old days of separate electorates, the reasons why Muslims voted for a particular candidate often had more to do with who they were – their local standing and influence – rather than which party's hat they wore. So, for instance, in Ketugram in Burdwan in 1952, the Muslim voters of the constituency voted for the Muslim Congress candidate not because they were secular or because he was a Congressman, but 'because he was a Muslim and [the] son-in-law [of] a local zamindar'.[115]

Nevertheless, the outcome of the 1952 elections in Bengal's Muslim-dominated constituencies seemed to suggest that joint electorates might indeed over time work gradually to rub away a separate Muslim political identity. Yet paradoxically, from the mid-1950s, a distinctively 'Muslim politics' began to re-emerge in Bengal. The deals of convenience which a few members of the Muslim elite had struck with the ruling party did little to bridge the widening gulf between ordinary Muslims and the mainstream of Bengal's political society. On the contrary, the processes by which Muslims ended up in clusters and ghettos had heightened perceptions that Muslims were a community apart, which needed to maintain a political identity of its own. For Muslim refugees in the ghettos, with their unhappy experience of being attacked, intimidated and driven out of their homes and not allowed to return because they were 'Muslims', the stamp of separateness was not about to be erased in some new sense of fraternity with their Hindu fellows. Indeed, the reason why evacuees and immigrants alike chose to live in Muslim clusters was that they felt safer among their own people.[116] Every fact of daily life inside Muslim enclaves – the reasons for being there and the shelter given to them by their co-religionists – heightened their sense of being Muslims and made solidarities of religion even stronger than they had been before.

In the way of all ghettos, these little Muslim pockets soon developed a 'high degree' of integration and organisation.[117] Inside them, Muslims began to recreate the patterns of social and cultural life they felt they were

[115] Sailesh Chandra Sinha to the General Secretary, AICC, 2 August 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

[116] In a manner not dissimilar to migrant workers in the jute mills of Calcutta whom Dipesh Chakrabarty studied, or the Kanpur millhands described by Chitra Joshi, the very process of migration reinforced 'bonds of community' and 'ties of religion' among these displaced Muslims: D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history*; Joshi, 'Bonds of community'.

[117] See, for instance, Wirth's study of Jewish ghettos, which describes the emergence of strong internal organisation ('verging on overorganisation') of Jewish communities in Europe and the United States: Louis Wirth, 'The Ghetto', in Wirth, *On cities and social life. Selected papers*, Chicago, 1964.

in danger of losing. They began to form – or sometimes to revive – local organisations to preserve customs and regulate community affairs inside the rapidly changing society of the enclaves. In time, these local bodies came to see the wisdom of forging connections with other like-minded associations with goals similar to their own. By 1955, in Calcutta alone there were as many as eleven different city-wide Muslim organisations.[118] The largest of these, with 25,000 members, was the Tabligh Jamaat: the key man behind it was the imam of the Tipu Sultan mosque, whose main object, according to the police, was 'to preach the superiority' of Islam and 'to safeguard the general interests of the Muslims in India'. In due course even small local *anjumans* began to link up with other bodies. The Anjuman Tanzimul Momenin, with 7,000 members, became the central committee of twenty-eight different West Bengal Muslim organisations, mainly in Calcutta and Howrah, where Scheduled Caste Momenin Muslims tended to live together.[119] There were also separate organisations of Shias and Ahmediyas. By 1955, fifteen different newspapers in West Bengal, each with a circulation of a few thousand copies, addressed a specifically Muslim audience.[120]

By the mid-1950s, West Bengal's Muslim clusters had evolved a lively cultural and political life of their own, distinctively Muslim, yet by no means homogeneous. However, there were pressures upon them, as much from within as from without, to identify common interests and concerns. The Rezae Mustafa, the Tabligh Jamaat, the Muslim Jamaat, the Jamaat Islami and Al Hadis all claimed to speak for the Muslim community as a whole, to promote its culture, to highlight its grievances and to propose measures to improve its lot. Soon after partition, the perception gained ground, and not without reason, that the state of West Bengal discriminated against its Muslim subjects. One main issue was government's failure to do anything to help rehabilitate displaced Muslims. When some help, however misguided and half-hearted, was

[118] These included the Rezae Mustafa, the Tabligh Jamaat, the Tabligh Serat Conference, the Muslim Jamaat, the Jamaat Islami, the Anjuman Ahmediya, the Momin Conference, the West Bengal Muslim Rehabilitation Committee, Al Hadis, the Anjuman Tanzimul Momenin and the Jamait ul Ulemai Hind. Enclosure to DCP SB, CID to SSP II IB dated 9 July 1955, in GB IB File No. 2114–55.

[119] These included the Tanzimul Momenin (Baoria, Howrah), the Tanzimul Momenin (Kankinara), the Anjuman Ghareebul Muslemeen (Titagarh and Metiabruz branches), the Istefaqia Committee (Kidderpore), the Welfare Association (Pipe Road), the Iqbalpur Byam Samiti (Ekbalpur), the Anjuman Talim o Taraqqi (Beniapukur), the Taltolla Bustee panchayat (Taltola), the Anjuman Rahmania (Tangra), and so on: enclosure to DCP SB, CID to SSP II IB, dated 9 July 1955, in GB IB File No. 2114–55.

[120] The following newspapers were described as 'Muslim dailies and weeklies': *Azad Hind*, *Imroze*, *Al Huq*, *Asra Jadid*, *Rozana*, *Absar*, *Asia*, *Manzil*, *Paigam*, *Mohammadi*, *Tabligh*, *Qoran Prachar*, *Moawin*, *Insaf* and *Asaar*: *ibid.*

finally given to Hindu refugees from eastern Bengal, the fact that still nothing was being done for Muslims became the focus of resentment. It became the central issue on which *Paigam*, the organ of the West Bengal Muslim Rehabilitation Board, constantly harped, while condemning what today would be described as the 'institutional' communalism of West Bengal's administration and police.

Significantly, Muslims who had been given a place at the Congress high table were not well situated to voice such concerns. For one thing, these politicians by definition had not suffered the personal hardships humbler Muslims had had to endure since partition. The very fact that they had survived and prospered in partitioned India set them apart from their less fortunate co-religionists. In order to make their mark in Congress circles in the 1950s, ambitious Muslim politicians had ostentatiously to display their 'secular' credentials. This did not sit comfortably with portraying themselves as champions of specifically Muslim grievances or having to speak up about matters which the Congress would rather have swept under the carpet. As Theodore Wright perceptively observed in 1966, Congress culture did not encourage its Muslim fellow-travellers to represent popular Muslim opinion.[121] In the unique circumstances of divided Bengal, the fact that a few dozen Muslim grandees were able to take advantage of Congress fights and factions to get back into the swing of politics did not mean that Muslim concerns had thereby found effective spokesmen in the Congress camp.

The task of speaking up for the community was left instead to local Muslim leaders, such as the *mohalla sardars* (neighbourhood bosses) who had persuaded their co-religionists that it was wise to 'stay quiet' at Holi in 1959, and to the heads of the various *jamaats* and *anjumans*, such as S. M. Salahuddin, whose leadership and advice they looked to in the aftermath of the Jubbulpore riots. Salahuddin was the boss of the Anjuman Mufidul Islam, a charity for burying Muslim paupers, and he gained a reputation as an independent and fearless champion of lowly Muslims by speaking up for Selimpore's Muslims when they were prevented in 1956 from burying a corpse in their traditional burial ground.[122] 'Independents' of the ilk of Syed Badruddoza of Murshidabad made their political mark by leading organisations such as the Muslim Jamaat and the West Bengal Muslim Rehabilitation Association.

When furious Muslim agitation against government broke out in 1956 after an inflammatory and pejorative 'biography' of the Prophet was

[121] Theodore P. Wright Jnr, 'The effectiveness of Muslim representation in India', in D. E. Smith (ed.), *South Asian politics and religion*, Princeton, 1966, p. 130.
[122] See J. Chatterji, 'Of ghettos and graveyards'.

reprinted, this was no bolt from the blue. In the Muslim enclaves, discontent with the Congress had been brewing for some time. By 1956, there were leaders, organisations and journals ready and willing to take up cudgels not just in defence of local 'Muslim interests', but against what they perceived as a Hindu government. The offending book had been published by the semi-official Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, and its foreword was written by K. M. Munshi, who had played a large part in framing India's constitution and was now governor of Uttar Pradesh. This lent the agitation against the book an anti-establishment colouring. Protest meetings were held all over the state, but particularly in the Muslim-dominated parts of Calcutta, Howrah, Burdwan, Murshidabad and Malda, demanding that the book be withdrawn and that Munshi be forced to resign as governor.[123]

The 'anti-blasphemy' agitation of 1956 was evidence that, less than a decade after partition, the Muslim pockets of West Bengal had begun to throw up their own leaders, willing and able to take up specifically 'Muslim' causes and to speak out against the Congress. A police report on one large protest meeting tells of 'the challenging and desperate mood of some of the speakers' who

> asked the police officers present to take down their speeches to the effect that the Muslims did not owe allegiance to such a Government as would permit the repeated publication of scurrilous literature defaming their Prophet. They were not afraid of leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad and . . . they were ready to face any consequences.[124]

At a meeting of the Fidayan-i-Millat, an organisation set up to orchestrate the protest, one speaker said that 'Muslims were not at the mercy of Shri Nehru and they considered themselves free.'[125] For its part, the Hindu press in Calcutta noticed this newly assertive mood and roundly denounced 'the boundless audacity and insolence of the Calcutta Urdu-speaking Muslims in demonstrating in the most rowdy manner on the street'. Editors of Bengal's Hindu press urged the government to take swift and firm action against Muslims 'before they got too big for their boots' to 'put them in their place'.[126]

123 Details of the protests are given in GB IB File No. 3214–56 (Part II).
124 Report of a meeting held on 9 September 1956 at the Muslim Institute Hall, GB IB File No. 3214–56.
125 'A note on the agitation by Muslims against the publication of an article in *Jugantar* dated 20 August 1956 and a book "Religious leaders" published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan', GB IB File No. 3214–56 (Part I).
126 'A note on the part played by different presses in connection with the agitation over the publication of the book "Religious leaders"', GB IB File No. 3214–56.

But the Calcutta hacks had missed the point. It was precisely because Muslims had been 'put in their place' that they had become 'too big for their [much diminished] boots'. Paradoxically, the process of ghettoisation had given Muslims not only a greater sense of grievance and a greater sense of solidarity, but also a measure of political influence they might not otherwise have had. In an era of universal franchise, the fact that Muslim voters were clustered together in dense pockets meant that, in several constituencies all over West Bengal, they held the key to electoral success. Had they been more evenly scattered throughout Bengal's population, they would have wielded less power at the polling booth. Like India's Scheduled Tribes, who also tended to huddle together inside shrinking 'tribal belts' and who had become a decisive voting block in some constituencies, Muslims had regained a degree of political influence in Bengal despite their social 'backwardness' and their much reduced numbers.[127]

This pattern, and its significance, did not go unnoticed for long by the politicians of West Bengal. In 1957, the chief minister Dr B. C. Roy wrote to Nehru, drawing his attention to election 'results which are so important that I felt I should communicate [them] to you . . . In a predominantly Hindu area with only 28 per cent Muslims and where last year a Hindu Mahasabha candidate was returned', the Congress put up a Muslim candidate, Abdus Sattar, who polled 32,000 votes to defeat his Mahasabha rival; and 'in Coochbehar constituency where Muslims are only 33 per cent a Muslim candidate has just polled 6,000 more votes than a Forward Bloc nominee in a general seat'.

As Dr Roy concluded with an uncharacteristic dryness, 'these results [were] interesting'.[128] For their part, West Bengal's Muslims were not unaware of their own growing importance. They had discovered how their power at the ballot box might be deployed to their advantage. They could use it to force the government and all the parties to be more responsive to their concerns. By threatening to cross over to the opposition, they could winkle out more Congress tickets for their own candidates. In 1952, Cooch Behar Muslims had solidly supported Congressmen. By 1956, in contrast, they were much more canny about casting their votes in favour of the party in office. As the Muslim former president of the Cooch Behar District Congress explained,

[127] Galanter observed similar patterns in his study of the electoral fortunes of India's Scheduled Tribes: Marc Galanter, *Competing equalities. Law and the backward classes in India*, Berkeley, 1984.

[128] Dr B. C. Roy to Nehru, 11 March 1957, cited in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 349–50.

> The Muslims of this district are prone to feel that their progress and advancement are being neglected by the Government. There have been happenings which show that below the surface there is a current of distrust and distaste of the Muslim community among the Hindus. This was in evidence particularly where the refugees are in concentration. The Muslims feel that their security is not yet fully established. Some of our community in disappointment have in recent years gone over to the Forward Bloc and some to the Communist camp. In some demonstrations against the Government and the Congress it was found that some Muslims took an active part.

The 'panacea', in his view, was 'an extra Muslim seat'.[129] In 1957, the Congress ignored his plea and did not appoint a second Muslim to its list of candidates from Cooch Behar. But by 1962 it had seen the advantages of doing so; and in 1967 it again gave extra Congress tickets to Muslim candidates in the coming elections (see table 4.3).

For their part, politicians of all hues who intended to win elections in West Bengal also began to calculate how best to woo 'the Muslim vote'. Candidates with the support of Muslim voters clearly had the edge in elections in constituencies with Muslim majorities. But it increasingly became obvious that even in constituencies in which they were a minority, because they were bunched together and increasingly well organised, Muslims could sometimes tilt the electoral balance. In 1957, even in those areas where Muslims were less than 10 per cent of the population, local politicians recognised that the Muslim vote mattered. In 1956, one such hopeful politician, Kumaresh Chandra of Nabadwip, launched a passionate tirade against the government's failure to rehabilitate Nadia's displaced Muslims, claiming that government had stood by while local zamindars grabbed Muslim land.[130] Investigating this story, police concluded that its author's motive was that he wanted to stand as a candidate in the next general election 'and as election propaganda he generally fights for any cause of the Muslims in that area'.[131] Nabadwip's Muslims were just 5 per cent of the total population,[132] but were clearly regarded by this ambitious local man as having sufficient electoral clout to deserve to be wooed vigorously.

Inevitably, the realisation that all and sundry were queuing up to court them gave Muslim voters a sense of their new effectiveness. As a Congressman from Ketugram in Burdwan pointed out, the Muslims

129 Ansaruddin Ahmed to Dr B. C. Roy, 3 June 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.
130 '22 September "Religious Leaders"er pratibad dibas Hindu o Mussalmander militbhabe palaner janya Shree Kumaresh Chandrer ahbaan' ('Kumaresh Chandra's call for the joint observance of anti-"Religious Leaders" days by Hindus and Muslims'), *Paigam*, 15 September 1956.
131 Note by DIB CID Nadia, dated 10 November 1956, GB IB File No. 3214–56 (Part II).
132 *1961 Census*, p. 223.

Table 4.3. *Party-political profile of Muslim candidates in general elections in West Bengal, 1952–1967*

Year	Congress	Opposition parties	Independents	Total Muslim MLAs
1952	21 [17]	14 [0]	45 [2]	19
1957	28 [20]	13 [3]	55[a] [2]	25
1962	31 [17]	38 [4]	50 [3]	24
1967	31 [18]	30 [14]	48 [5]	37

Square brackets show number of victorious candidates.
Source: Dilip Banerjee, *Election recorder, part I, West Bengal, 1952–1987*, Calcutta, 1990.
[a] One CPI supported

had voted for the Congress because they were afraid of losing its patronage in 1952. But by 1956, he reported, 'they [had] become conscious enough and [were] not afraid of losing Congress patronage. In view of that, if the Congress [could not] marshal the Mohammedan voters, there [was] every chance of losing the seat this time.'[133] As elections grew more polarised and more closely contested, with 'united front' candidates supported by leftist parties giving the Congress a close run for its money, the capacity of the organised Muslim vote to determine the outcome by coming out *en masse* in favour of one or other aspirant increased, and, with it, their awareness of their power.

This led to an unseemly competition by politicians to try and get 'the Muslim vote' in a whole range of constituencies, not just in those where they were in a majority. The beneficiaries were all Muslim politicians across a broad political spectrum who claimed to enjoy the confidence of their constituents. Some of these were 'independents', who had built up a network of support by speaking out on matters which concerned the Muslim voters at a time when Congress Muslims had unwisely kept mum. Syed Badruddoza of Murshidabad, who won a reputation for speaking out fearlessly for his Muslim constituents, was the type of politician who now began to wield great political influence. In 1952, he had stood as an independent from two constituencies in Murshidabad (where Muslims were in a majority), Raninagar and Jalangi – and had lost both seats to his Congress rivals, also Muslims. In the run-up to the 1957 elections, he had built up a core of Muslim support through the Jamaat

[133] S. C. Sinha to General Secretary, AICC, 2 August 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

and the Muslim Rehabilitation Association. Some policemen even believed that he had personally engineered the 'blasphemy agitation' of 1956 in order to take over the Jamaat. Informers considered him to be the 'worst known offender' among the local Muslim leaders who 'tried their best to consolidate the Muslims against the Congress', who allegedly 'described the Congress-sponsored Muslim candidates as mere show-boys of the Congress who would be of no help to the Muslims and in whose hands Islam would not be safe'.[134]

In the run-up to the 1957 election, Syed Badruddoza saw his chance to use his much improved standing by cutting a series of deals with opposition parties. In 1957, he toured Murshidabad, speaking at the hustings, wheeling and dealing with local Muslim leaders 'as well as some leftist party leaders. It is understood that in order to ensure the defeat of the Congress Party during the elections [he] urged the Muslims to support the leftist candidates.'[135] These tactics paid off. Badruddoza gained support from voters on the left (in return, no doubt, for lending his support to their candidates in other constituencies) and won the Raninangar seat from the incumbent Congress candidate. In the Bharatpur constitutency, he was only narrowly defeated.[136] Winning at Raninangar was a sign of the times: it signalled the growing power of the new Muslim leadership which had emerged as spokesmen of the dispossessed and the marginalised in the Muslim ghettos and clusters of West Bengal.

Other 'independent' Muslim leaders tried a different tack. They planned to win influence not by flirting with the opposition, but by banding together into new groupings of their own. Before the elections in 1957, the leaders of various organisations – the Rezai Mustafa, the Jamaati Islami, the Muslim Jamaat (Bashir group), the Anjuman Tanzimul Momenin, the Itefaquia Committee and the Fidayan-i-Millat – 'decided to form a united front to contest elections against the Congress. They succeeded in forming a Muslim United Front, subsequently named [the] West Bengal Minorities United Front',[137] and in Murshidabad district 'all the Independent candidates ... adopted one common symbol, partly to show their unity and partly to present it as a symbol of Muslim unity to Muslim voters'.[138]

[134] SFR for the second half of March 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

[135] SFR for the second half of January 1957 for West Bengal, *ibid.*

[136] SFR for the second half of March 1957 for West Bengal, *ibid.*

[137] Its first president was Prince Mirza Muhammad Bedar Bakhl Bahadur, last descendant of the Mughals. But perhaps the symbolism of that gesture was deemed inappropriate and, soon afterwards, the prince was replaced as president by Shamsul Huq, MLA: Memo No. 1034-C, 26 March 1957, GB IB File No. 114–57.

[138] SFR for the second half of March 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

Despite these efforts, independent Muslim candidates made only modest gains at the polls: in 1957, they won only two seats (no more than in 1952), in 1962 three and in 1967 five[139] (see table 4.3). One reason for this limited success was that, in a reverse trend, some Muslim politicians, often after they had achieved a measure of personal standing among their constituents and thereby having raised their price in the political bazaar, crossed over to other parties, mainly the Congress.[140] As the competition for the allegiance of those who could deliver the Muslim vote grew ever more intense,[141] they grew cannier and more cagey about putting their eggs in any one basket. Here again, Syed Badruddoza's campaign is a case in point. Long after the election had been fought and won in Murshidabad, he continued to denounce Congress Muslim candidates as 'showboys', but now also turned upon the leftists and called them 'communal'. He was particularly critical of Jyoti Basu of the Communist Party of India who, in the course of an Assembly speech, had made no reference 'to the plight of Muslims'.[142] Clearly Badruddoza and others like him were not about to let any party, whether on the treasury or on the opposition benches, take their support for granted. Of course, the intense rivalries generated by the elections in these constituencies did not necessarily unite their inhabitants; later in 1957 the police reported continued 'tension' in Badruddoza's constituency 'between the supporters of rival candidates'; and that his supporters continued to 'intimidate' their opponents.[143] It was no coincidence that it was in an election year that the 'Jamait-ul-Ulema and the Khilafat Committee quarrelled among themselves over the holding of Id prayers',[144] a sign that the intense rivalry for the support of Muslims sometimes led to conflict rather than harmony inside the very ghetto communities which their leaders were attempting to unite and mobilise.

These squabbles notwithstanding, Syed Badruddoza's claim that in many key contests between the Congress and the opposition in 1957

[139] D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*.

[140] For instance, Lotfal Hoque, who stood as an independent from Suti in Murshidabad and won in 1952, contested the elections successfully as a Congress candidate in 1957 and 1962. A. B. A. Gani Khan Choudhury stood from Malda as an independent in 1952 and 1957. In 1962 and 1967, he stood as a Congressman: *ibid*.

[141] In the first fortnight of January 1957, the CPI decided to 'depute local Muslim workers for enlisting the support of the Muslim voters through anti-Congress propaganda': SFR for the first half of January 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I. As will be seen in chapter 6, every other party joined the fray in the bid to win the backing of influential Muslims.

[142] SFR for the first half of June 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

[143] SFR for the first half of April 1957, p. 3, *ibid*.

[144] SFR for the second half of April 1957, p. 3, *ibid*.

'Muslims had held the balance'could not be ignored.[145] No party could disregard this fact in the years which followed. All of them had to take note of Muslim concerns and make at least a show of trying to address them. But the issues that concerned Muslims – their isolation in ghettos, the poverty of their communities and the hostility and suspicion with which they were treated – were too complex and politically too sensitive to be tackled head-on. So instead, every party increasingly used the tactic of putting up Muslim candidates in constituencies where Muslims were concentrated. Between 1952 and 1962, the number of Muslim candidates doubled (see table 4.3), as did the number of Muslims returned to the Assembly. By 1967, there were twice as many Muslims in the Assembly as there had been in 1952, pretty well evenly divided between the government and the opposition benches. Indeed, by 1967, with thirty-seven MLAs, Muslims had achieved representation more or less in line with their proportion of the population as a whole. If the reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Tribes and Anglo-Indians are discounted, Muslims had come to hold about 18 per cent of the general seats in a state where, according to the previous census, they were roughly 19 per cent of the population.[146]

In time, all parties put up Muslim candidates in constituencies where Muslim voters played a key role. In successive elections, certain constituencies began to look almost like seats reserved especially for Muslim candidates. In 1952, only one constituency (Kaliachak in Malda) had been contested solely by Muslim candidates. By 1962, six constituencies had exclusively Muslim candidates fighting it out among themselves.[147] In another four constituencies (two in Murshidabad and two in the 24 Parganas), all the serious contenders were Muslims. Moreover, there were a substantial number of seats where, time after time, Muslim candidates won hands down, even though non-Muslims had entered the fray[148] (see map 4.4). In 1967, the pattern was much the same.

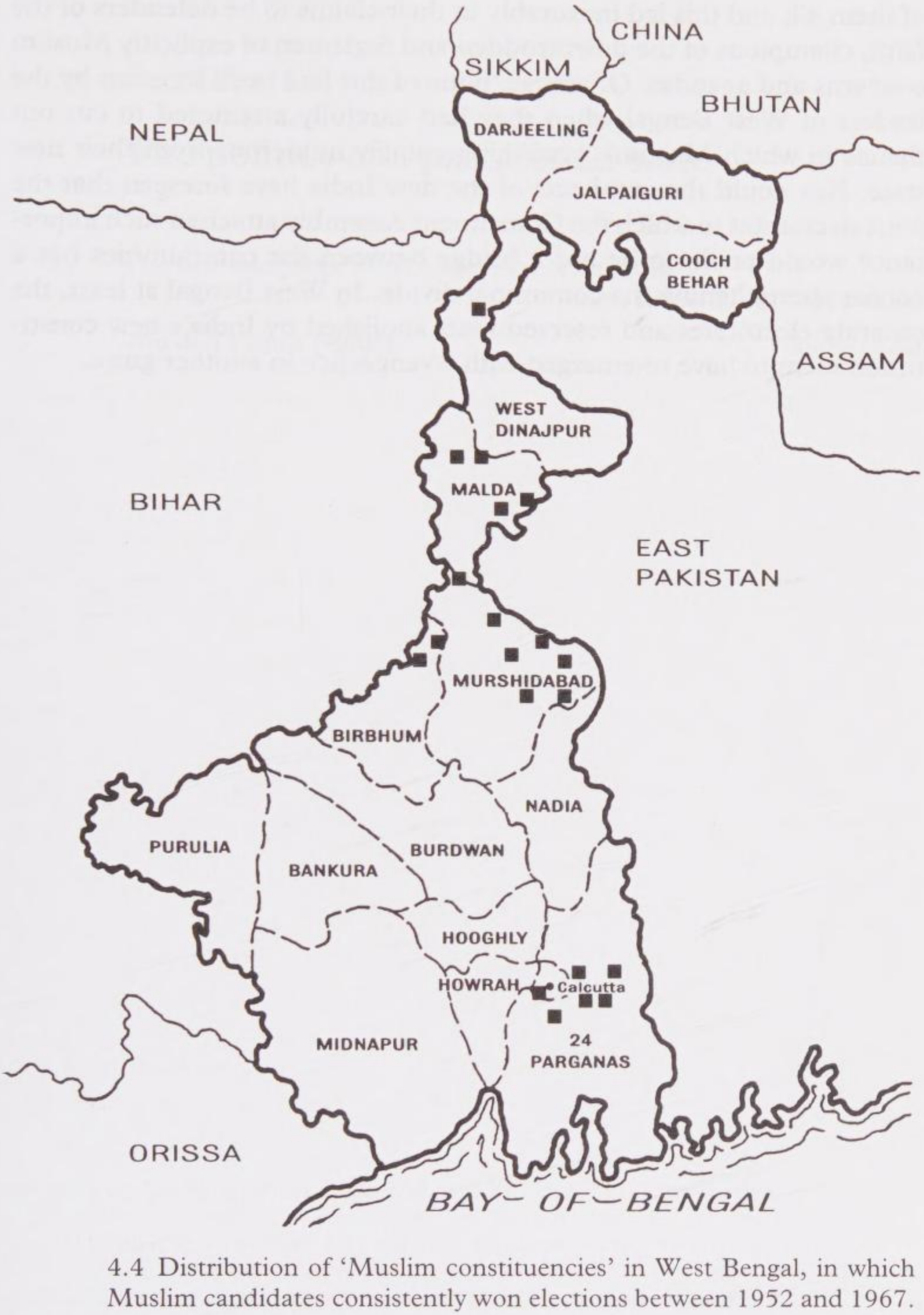
In constituencies which came to be seen by everyone as 'Muslim' seats, the political agenda and the language of electioneers came to be stridently

[145] Report of a meeting at the residence of Syed Badruddoza on 6 June 1957: SFR for the first half of June for West Bengal, 1957, p. 3, *ibid.*

[146] In 1967, in an Assembly of 284 members, 55 seats were reserved for Scheduled Castes, 16 for Scheduled Tribes and 4 for Anglo-Indians. This left 209 seats open for 'general' contest, and Muslim candidates were returned to 17.7 per cent of these: D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*, p. 111.

[147] These were Goalpakhar in West Dinajpur, Sujapur in Malda, Farakka, Suti, and Lalgola in Murshidabad, and Garden Reach in the 24 Parganas.

[148] These included Raningar, Jalangi, Naoda and Hariharpara in Murshidabad, Kharba and Harishchandrapur in Malda, Nalhati and Murarai in Birbhum, Deganga, Baduria, Haroa, Bhangar and Magraghat in the 24 Parganas, and Taltola in Calcutta.



4.4 Distribution of 'Muslim constituencies' in West Bengal, in which Muslim candidates consistently won elections between 1952 and 1967.

and unabashedly communal both in content and in tone. Since the plausible candidates for election in these constituencies were all Muslims, however different the party hats they wore, they strove to prove that they were the most committed, the most genuine, Muslims

of them all; and this led inexorably to their claims to be defenders of the faith, champions of the downtrodden and fuglemen of explicitly Muslim concerns and agendas. Of course, none of this had been foreseen by the leaders of West Bengal when they had carefully attempted to cut out thanas in which Muslims were threateningly numerous from their new state. Nor could the architects of the new India have foreseen that the joint electorates to which the Constituent Assembly attached such importance would prove to be not a bridge between the communities but a barrier strengthening the communal divide. In West Bengal at least, the separate electorates and reserved seats abolished by India's new constitution seem to have re-emerged with a vengeance in another guise.

Part III

The politics of a partitioned state

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.

After Robert Burns, 'To a Mouse'.

You don't know politics.

Atulya Ghosh

5 Political reconstruction and change: Congress government and politics, 1947–1967

The demand by Bengal's Hindus for a province inside India in which they would be the majority was intended to lead them securely through the upheavals of partition to a prosperous future. The borders of the province were designed to give it a population upon whose support the leadership could depend. Smaller and poorer after its vivisection, West Bengal, they believed, would become a stable and cohesive polity, part of a larger union in which its special relationship with the centre would compensate for the losses that partition entailed.

After Congress took office in the new state in August 1947, it soon became clear that these plans were going badly wrong. Partition transformed Bengal's political landscape. Having lost two-thirds of its territory to Pakistan, West Bengal was left with only 89 of the 250 constituencies in the Assembly of undivided Bengal. This upset all the old balances and changed the standing of every political party in the new state, often in quite unintended ways. In general, partition tended to strengthen those factions and groups which had been active in the territory which now constituted West Bengal, whereas those with bases mainly in eastern Bengal, not surprisingly, became weaker. Cast adrift from their local moorings, parties once influential in the east had to regroup and find a role for themselves in the west. Partition led to intense jockeying for position among all parties, as every politician and faction in Bengal struggled to survive and best their rivals in the changed circumstances of the new state.

Before partition, the provincial arms of two all-India parties, the Muslim League and the Congress, had dominated Bengal's politics. Two other parties with a role outside Bengal, the Communist Party of India and the Hindu Mahasabha, also had a presence in the province, although neither had done well in the elections of 1945–6 (see table 5.1). A host of lesser parties, mainly on the left, tended to be phenomena exclusive to Bengal, although one or two of them had a plausible claim to relevance beyond the bounds of the old province. These included the Forward Bloc, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Revolutionary

Table 5.1. *Votes polled by parties in all contested seats in undivided Bengal, 1945–1946*

Party	Total seats contested	Total votes polled	Percentage of total votes cast in election
Congress	82	2,378,324	42.91
Muslim League	111	2,036,775	36.74
Communists	20	159,304	2.87
Krishak Praja	44	131,191	2.36
Scheduled Caste Federation	8	97,204	1.75
Hindu Mahasabha	27	79,187	1.43
Kshatriya Samity	5	43,451	0.78
Jamiat-ul-Ulema	12	27,756	0.50
Emarat Party	3	16,941	0.31
Muslim Parliamentary Board	10	15,816	0.28
Radical Democrats	16	10,747	0.19
Nationalist Muslims	5	4,426	0.08
Independents	152	542,168	9.78
TOTAL	495	5,543,290	100

The figures have been replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: 'Franchise. Elections in Bengal, 1946', L/P&J/8/475, India Office Records.
This election was the last general election under the 1935 act, with its limited franchise, separate electorates and reserved constituencies. Of the smaller 'parties' on the left, several had boycotted the 1945–6 elections and therefore do not figure in this table. It provides a useful snapshot, although by no means a comprehensive panorama, of the political scene in Bengal before independence and partition.

Communist Party of India, the Bolshevik Party, the Radical Democrats and the Socialists. Other groups, whose appeal was restricted to particular castes or communities, such as the Caste Federation and the Nationalist Muslim Party, were on the margins of Bengal's politics, deploying separate electorates and reserved seats for the Muslims and the Scheduled Castes to keep themselves going in a modest way.

In West Bengal, the most obvious casualty of partition was the Muslim League. Having dominated Bengal's governments since 1937, the League now collapsed. Those Muslim notables who stayed on in West Bengal joined other parties, in particular the Congress, or were courted by new groups which competed to win the votes of the Muslims who remained. But the Muslim League was not the only casualty: every party with support in the eastern districts was adversely affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by partition.

Partition and the Bengal Congress

Paradoxically it was Bengal's longest established party, the Congress, which partition threw instantly and most spectacularly into disarray. Ever since 1939, when Subhas Bose had launched his doomed challenge to the all-India leadership at Tripuri, the party had been at sixes and sevens.[1] In the early 1940s, the high command, in an attempt to strengthen its grip over the provincial committees and intolerant of such flagrant dissent, purged the Bengal Congress of Bose's supporters. This emasculated the Congress in Bengal and left its organisation in chaos. In an effort to restore a measure of order, the high command in 1940 set up an *ad hoc* executive committee of its placemen in charge of the Bengal Congress. This motley committee, consisting of Gandhians, erstwhile terrorists and a few men of pelf and purse, was still tottering along in 1945. When the war ended, the high command made no effort to reorganise the Bengal Congress and put it on a secure footing. Instead, in 1945, it declared that only Congressmen who were members in 1940 would be allowed to hold elective office in the party, a device patently designed to keep out Bose's supporters. Since no new party elections were held, this *ad hoc* and unrepresentative committee of 1940 remained in charge of the rump of the old Congress when Bengal was partitioned in 1947.[2] After independence, power in other provinces devolved to the leaders of existing provincial Congress committees, most of which had run provincial governments between 1937 and 1939. In West Bengal, the situation was quite different. The Congress had never ruled Bengal. So at the critical juncture when India won independence and was partitioned, Bengal's Congress leaders had no secure mandate in their province. Factional dogfights now broke out at every level of the Bengal Congress. This was par for the course in the province, but the cynical ruthlessness with which the would-be leaders fought to hijack the gravy train of office was unseemly, even by the exacting standards of fractious Bengal.

Among these bidders for power the more prescient had for some time before partition prepared themselves for battle. Realising that the new borders would determine who would control the new state, particular factions strove to influence the lie of West Bengal's frontiers so as to give themselves the edge. The Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti's proposal for a miniature West Bengal was driven by such palpably self-interested

[1] For details, see Leonard Gordon, *Bengal. The Nationalist movement 1876–1940*, New Delhi, 1979.
[2] J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 124–30.

calculations. Their proposal may have failed, but the Samiti were to crystallise into an enduring factional alliance of Congressmen from the south-western districts of the new state. This was the notorious 'Hooghly group'. Its leading members were a handful of Gandhians, latter-day 'no-changers'[3] who, as followers of the Mahatma, had taken up spinning, weaving, good works and village welfare in the mid-1920s. They were mainly situated in the Arambagh subdivision of the Hooghly district and in Bankura. In these rural parts, the Congress had put down strong roots during non-cooperation and the anti-chaukidari tax campaigns of the 1920s;[4] it had also won some support from Bengal's middle castes, particularly the numerous upwardly mobile Mahishyas, once lowly fishermen who were pushing at the gates of the twice-born.[5] In the 1930s, Prafulla Chandra Sen had stood against the Bose brothers[6] and built up a considerable network of supporters in this south-western region of Bengal. He now became leader of the Hooghly faction. His protégé, Atulya Ghosh, a 'one-time nondescript clerk of a minor bank in Calcutta',[7] who had returned to his village in Hooghly to play politics, became the faction's organiser and fixer. But even after the Bose bloc had been defenestrated from the Congress, the Hooghly group, constrained by the narrow geographical limits of its appeal and with only 10 seats of 250 in the Bengal Assembly, was not a dominant player in the politics of the province. It was only after partition that its stock began to rise.

The Hooghly faction had to dodge and weave in its bid for power after independence. Partition notwithstanding, the Bengal Congress was still an organisation dominated by members from eastern Bengal. Under the Congress constitution, the Provincial Congress Committee consisted of the province's delegates to the All-India Congress Committee. The old

[3] 'No-changers' were those Congressmen who, after 1923, stuck to non-cooperation, while the 'pro-changers' were those who wanted to enter the councils. See Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928–1934. The politics of protest*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 26–33.

[4] Rajat Ray, *Social conflict and political unrest in Bengal, 1875–1927*, Oxford, 1984, pp. 290–2. The chaukidari tax was levied on a locality to pay for its chaukidar (village policeman).

[5] See Hitesranjan Sanyal, 'Congress movements in the villages of eastern Midnapore, 1921–1931', in Marc Gaborieu (ed.), *Asia du sud. Traditions et changement*, Paris, 1979; Sanyal, 'Arambager Jatiabadi Andolan' [The nationalist movement in Arambagh], *Anya Artha*, 6 (September 1974); Sanyal, 'Bankura Jelay Jatiabadi Andolan' [The nationalist movement in Bankura district], *Anya Artha*, 10 (January 1977); and Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and politics in West Bengal', in his *Present history of West Bengal*, Delhi, 1997.

[6] In the 1930s, during the internecine struggles inside the Bengal Congress between Sarat and Subhas Bose and their rivals, the Hooghly faction did their bit by leading the attack on the *krishak samitis* (peasant committees), which the Boses had tried to set up: J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, p. 117.

[7] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 173.

Table 5.2. *Congress organisation in Bengal on the eve of partition*

District	Total no. of sub-divisional Congress committees	Total no. of primary members	District	Total no. of sub-divisional Congress committees	Total no. of primary members
East Bengal			*West Bengal*		
Bogra	1	8,162	Birbhum	2	6,389
Barisal	5	18,431	Bankura	2	9,451
Cachar	2	3,310	Burdwan	4	18,744
Chittagong	2	13,916	Darjeeling	3	2,613
Dacca	4	36,991	Dinajpur	5	5,821
Faridpur	6	22,152	Hooghly	3	25,494
Jessore	5	12,029	Howrah	2	22,821
Khulna	3	13,412	Jalpaiguri	2	5,084
Mymensingh	5	29,486	Murshidabad	4	14,433
Noakhali	2	10,051	Midnapore	5	34,865
Pabna	2	10,700	Malda	1	6,885
Sylhet	5	32,071	Nadia	5	10,686
Rajshahi	3	9,602	24 Parganas	?	?
Rangpur	4	12,044	North Calcutta	?	20,121
Tippera	3	24,667	Barabazar	?	12,039
Tripura State	?	2,537	Central Calcutta	?	15,366
			South Calcutta	?	19,864
TOTAL		**259,561**	TOTAL		**231,216**

The figures have been replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: GB IB File 20–47 (BPCC) TL 59/2/1/47.

rules laid down that the number of delegates from each province was determined by the district's population, not by the size of its Congress membership. Since they had the largest populations, the eastern districts of Bengal sent many more delegates to the AICC than the western ones, 344 compared to 200, even though Congress members were almost as numerous in the Hindu-dominated west as in the much more populous (but naturally not as Congress-oriented) Muslim east[8] (see table 5.2). In consequence, Congressmen from the western districts possessed, as they were

[8] Hence Mymensingh in the east, with its large population but with only 29,500 or so Congress members, had fifty-five delegates to the Provincial Congress Committee. In contrast, Midnapore in the west, with almost 35,000 members, had only thirty-two delegates: Kamini Kumar Banerjee, 'Why West Bengal has no respect for the Congress', 15 July 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1949.

wont bitterly to complain, less of a say in the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee and in All-India Congress affairs than did the easterners.[9]

In July 1947, the Congress Working Committee decided that Provincial Committees in the partitioned provinces of Bengal and the Punjab should continue to function as before until such time as the Congress came to rewrite its constitution.[10] However, the Working Committee did not return to this task until the middle of 1948. In this way, a decision taken very much on the hoof by the Working Committee gave delegates from East Bengal continued control over the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee for a whole year after partition. East Bengal Congress leaders, realising that this uncovenanted dominance over the Bengal Congress would give them a disproportionately important say in the government and politics of the new state, rushed to the west in the very first wave of Hindu migrants.[11] To begin with, it seemed that they had calculated the odds correctly. In August 1947, Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, a disciple of Gandhi from the Abhoy Ashram in Comilla in the east and a protégé of the All-India Congress president,

[9] Speaking for West Bengal, Atulya Ghosh and his coterie made the point bluntly to Rajendra Prasad at the AICC headquarters: 'The fixing of the number of delegates on the basis of total population did not however reflect the real position and perpetuated an injustice long felt in this province ... though Midnapore is far more Congress-minded and actually possesses 9.9 times Congress members of what Mymensingh has yet its quota of delegates is much less than two-thirds of the quota allotted to Mymensingh. This means that Mymensingh has a weightage of almost 19 times. The injustice of these arrangements will be apparent from the fact that in 1947, the total number of primary members in West Bengal has been 913,921 whereas the corresponding figure for east Bengal has been 224,158. But on the basis of total population West Bengal gets a quota of only 230 delegates ... This has always been a matter of grievance with Congress-minded districts of West Bengal': Atulya Ghosh, Sushil Banerjee *et al.* to Dr Rajendra Prasad, 14 May 1948, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 5-P/48. Typically, Ghosh's claims hugely exaggerated the strength of the West Bengal membership, as table 5.2 shows. Even assuming that the 24 Parganas had about 25,000 members, the total number of primary members in West Bengal in 1947 was not more than 250,000.

[10] 'Summary of the Proceedings of the Working Committee', AICC-I, G-30/1945–46.

[11] This unseemly haste did not go unobserved: one Congressman complained bitterly to Delhi that 'when east Bengal Hindus joined the partition movement, they could never expect that ... their so-called leaders ... would desert them ... The most painful thing was that the Comilla Abhoy Ashram and the All-India Spinners Association centres which in east Bengal were carrying out Mahatmaji's constructive works [*sic*] ... were closed down and Mahatmaji's closest disciples were found fleeing ... Had these valiant fighters for freedom not left east Bengal in such a cowardly fashion the rest of the minority community would not have lost courage': K. C. Ganguly to AICC President, 31 January 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1948. The author urged the Congress High Command to order 'Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, Dr Suresh Chandra Banerjee, Dr Nripendranath Bose, Sm. Labanya Lata Chanda, Lila Roy, Kiron Sankar Roy, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, Niharendu Datta Mazumdar, Surendra Mohan Ghosh, Arun Chandra Guha, Purna Chandra Das, who are original inhabitants of east Bengal to go back and live there permanently'.

Acharya Kripalani, took charge, with the centre's blessings, of the state government of West Bengal. Surendra Mohan Ghosh, a key man in the erstwhile terrorist organisation Jugantar from Mymensingh in East Bengal, continued, for the time being, to be the president of the Bengal Congress.

But the Hooghly faction was determined to break their dominance. The logic of partition was on their side. The East Bengal leaders had left their constituencies behind on the wrong side of the border and, in any event, they were even more deeply divided than their western counterparts. The Hooghly group may have had only ten members in the Assembly, but it skilfully hammered wedges into the fissures dividing their more numerous rivals from the east. First, it joined forces with Jugantar to drive Dr Prafulla Ghosh out of office, less than six months after he had been sworn in as premier. Then, in an inspired move, it offered its hand of support to Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy in his bid to become premier. Seen by the public as a man of stature (metaphorically as well as literally: being over six feet tall, he was something of a Gulliver among his fellow Bengalis), Dr Roy was unusual in belonging to no faction. But the king-makers hoped to influence him by their control of the party, since Roy possessed no organisational base of his own and had not yet even been elected to the Bengal Assembly. A successful 'society' doctor, since the 1920s Roy had been one of the so-called Big Five in Calcutta city politics. A former mayor of Calcutta and ex-vice chancellor of the university, Roy had served as an alderman on the Calcutta Corporation from 1938 to 1944. In these different roles, the good doctor had put his finger on the pulse not only of the city's middle-class literati[12] but also of its monied men. He was thus an appropriate person to serve as a link between small-town district leaders of the Hooghly faction and the big men of the metropolis. More importantly, Dr Roy had connections in high places in Delhi. Since 1932, when the high command's ambiguous reaction to the Communal Award of that year had split the Bengal party down the middle, Dr Roy had been one of the centre's key men in Bengal.[13] He was personal physician both to Gandhi and to Nehru. The canny politicians of Hooghly, realising that they needed a line to Delhi, saw that Dr Roy could provide it for them. Rather than plumping for one of their own, they chose him for the top job because they reckoned that Roy would be an effective emissary at the centre on their behalf.

The next stage in the Hooghly group's carefully planned campaign was to wrest control over the Congress party organisation from the Jugantar

[12] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 74. [13] J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 47–54.

faction of eastern Bengal. Their chance came in April 1948, when the AICC at its Bombay session at last decided that the Congress in East Bengal had to be disbanded and that West Bengal needed to be given a Provincial Congress Committee of its own. In the high command's belated reforms, members from the east were allowed to join the new West Bengal Congress only if they formally declared that they had made West Bengal their home before 30 April 1948 and could prove they were not members of the legislature, Constituent Assembly or any political organisation in Pakistan.[14] Of itself, this ruling might still not have been sufficient to destroy East Bengal's majority in the reconstituted Provincial Congress Committee had the centre not agreed, under pressure from the Hooghly group, to set up a sub-committee to scrutinise all the applications from would-be members from the east to join the West Bengal Congress.[15] Atulya Ghosh was one of the two people given the job of overseeing this scrutiny and he knew what he had to do. The result was that the East Bengal contingent in the Provincial Congress Committee of West Bengal was slashed to less than half its former strength, from 346 to 149 delegates. At a stroke, this cut the ground from under the feet of the easterners and destroyed their dominant position inside the Bengal Congress. In September 1950, when, for the first time in a decade, elections for the West Bengal Congress were held, the Hooghly group swept the polls. Atulya Ghosh, by this time the faction's unquestioned boss, became president of the Provincial Congress Committee of West Bengal.[16]

By these stratagems, this coterie of self-styled Gandhians from a small clutch of western districts took charge of West Bengal's politics after independence. For a province always outside the mainstream of Gandhi's movement, this might seem to have been an outcome as ironical as it was improbable. But the irony is more apparent than real. Whatever nod it may once have made towards observing Gandhian principles and practices,[17] after independence the Hooghly group quickly abandoned any pretence of ideological cohesion or commitment to Gandhi or what

[14] AICC resolution, Bombay, 24–25 April 1948, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 3-1/48.

[15] See the enclosure in Sushil Banerjee, Atulya Ghosh *et al.* to Dr Rajendra Prasad, 14 May 1948, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 5-P/48. In it, they argued that, under the All-India Congress Committee's new arrangements, east Bengalis should have only twelve seats on the Provincial Congress Committee.

[16] For a blow-by-blow account of these goings-on, see Sen Gupta, *The Congress party in West Bengal*, pp. 20–37.

[17] Atulya Ghosh, a harbinger of the Gandhian message in Bengal, had published a tract in Bengali on Gandhi and non-violence before independence. It was reprinted and translated into English in 1954, with a forward by his mentor P. C. Sen: Atulya Ghosh, *Ahimsa and Gandhi*, Calcutta, 1954.

he stood for.[18] After 1947, the Hooghly group was in essence no more than an opportunistic coalition of men and women drawn from its central and south-western district committees, chiefly Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnapore,[19] who banded together with the simple but ambitious purpose of breaking East Bengal's hold on the politics of the state and taking over the government of West Bengal.

Its narrow base and limited purpose notwithstanding, this coalition somehow held together, as did its alliance of convenience with Dr Roy. Roy remained at the helm in West Bengal until his death in 1962, when one of the king-makers – P. C. Sen – stood forth as dewan and became chief minister in his place. The one-eyed Atulya Ghosh, a deceptively mild-mannered Polyphemus behind the dark glasses which were his trademark, ran the Congress party in West Bengal for nearly twenty years with chilling efficiency. The new axis – essentially a coalition between the bosses of the south-western district committees and bigwigs in the Calcutta establishment – made sense in the changed circumstances after partition, and for this reason it endured and prospered. It won at the polls, dominated the provincial Assembly (see table 5.3) and, *mirabile dictu*, gave West Bengal the semblance of a stable government for two decades.

[18] Gandhi's injunction to his followers to keep out of office after independence was blatantly ignored: two of the faction's key members, P. C. Sen and Kalipada Mookerjee, clung to ministerial office despite losing the elections of 1952 and in face of Nehru's open disapproval (S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 199–200). When the Mahatma, in the last months of his life, urged Gandhians to return to constructive work, Bengal's political Gandhians ignored their leader's wishes. Already by September 1947, Panchanan Basu, the secretary of the Bengal Constructive Work Sub-Committee, had to admit 'with deep sorrow' that 'in spite of my best and humblest effort, I have not been able to move the district Congress committees in the matter of furthering constructive activities. There is almost no response from the DCCs to all my circulars [on] this behalf ... The reasons behind this passivity may be attributed ... to some extent [to] the love of power that has overtaken the workers.' The All-India Spinners Association, and its affiliated and subordinate organs in Bengal, had been reduced, he had to report, to a mere 125 workers spread out over ten districts. For its part, the Harijan Sevak Sangha in West Bengal, working for the huge constituency of Bengal's Scheduled Castes and untouchables, had only forty or so workers. As for rural good works, not a single Bengali could be persuaded to go into the countryside to promote village industries on the Gandhian model. In Basu's view, these extremely disappointing facts and figures were the consequence of a deep 'indifference' in the Congress Committees of Bengal to Gandhi's constructive programme: Panchanan Basu, to Secretary, Constructive Programme Department, 9 September 1947, AICC-I, CPD-1(5)/1947.

[19] In a letter to the AICC president in June 1949, Atulya Ghosh and eighteen of his allies complained about their east Bengal rivals. The signatories are listed by district, and this list gives away the geographical base of the alliance. Four of the signatories, including Atulya Ghosh himself, were from Hooghly, six from Midnapore, three from Burdwan, one each from Birbhum and the 24 Parganas, and four from central Calcutta: Atulya Ghosh *et al.* to the President of the Indian National Congress, 18 June 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1949.

Table 5.3. *Political parties in the West Bengal Assembly, 1952–1967*

Total no. of seats	238	252	252	280
Year	*1952*	*1957*	*1962*	*1967*
Congress	150	152	157	127
Bangla Congress	—	—	—	34
CPI (undivided Communist Party until 1962)	28	26	49	16
CPI (Marxist)	—	—	—	43
Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party[a]	15	—	—	—
Praja Socialist Party	—	21	5	7
Forward Bloc	14	8	13	14
Marxist Forward Bloc	—	2	1	1
Forward Bloc (Ruikar)[b]	1	—	—	—
Revolutionary Socialist Party	—	3	9	7
Revolutionary Communist Party of India	—	—	2	—
Workers' Party of India	—	—	—	2
Gorkha League	—	1	2	2
Samjukta Socialist Party	—	—	—	7
Socialist Unity Centre	1	2	—	4
Jana Sangha	9	—	—	1
Hindu Mahasabha	4	—	—	—
Swatantra Party	—	—	—	1
Socialist Republican Party	1	—	—	—
Lok Sevak Sangha	—	7	4	5
Independents and others	15	10	10	9

The figures have been replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: Dilip Banerjee, *Election recorder, part I, West Bengal, 1952–1987*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 527.
[a] The Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party and the Socialist Party merged in 1953 to form the Praja Socialist Party.
[b] The Forward Bloc (Ruikar) merged with the Praja Socialist Party in 1953.

The new Congress politics of West Bengal

Yet these realignments, and the fragile stability they produced in the politics of the state, were achieved at a price. After the dust had settled on these inglorious skirmishes, the main lineaments of the new structures of power in Bengal began to emerge. In the 1950s, it became clear that partition had irrevocably transformed West Bengal's society and had profoundly changed every aspect of its political life. The new regime

may have come to terms with the immediate territorial changes wrought by partition – indeed it was the chief beneficiary of these changes – but it was not able to control the social transformations which partition set in train. Nor, after partition and independence, did it do well out of the altered balance of power between centre and state.

The new factional alliance which ruled West Bengal won power by driving out its rivals from eastern Bengal, arguably an inevitable consequence of partition. Yet, in the long run, the means by which this was achieved damaged the Congress in Bengal. It was not just that the intrigue, the backstabbing and the Borgia-like machinations – mostly conducted in full view of the public – tarnished the party's reputation. Even more destructive in the longer term was that Atulya Ghosh and his allies, in their bid to destroy East Bengal's influence in the Congress, deliberately unleashed potentially dangerous 'sons-of-the-soil' sentiments among Ghotis of the west against the Bangaal[20] refugees from the east. After partition, when Prafulla Ghosh as chief minister welcomed public servants and officials from eastern Bengal and asked them to serve in his government, the Hooghly group used his invitation as an excuse to whip up anti-refugee sentiments amongst the locals in the districts.[21] In October 1947, a number of prominent Congressmen met at the Tamluk Memorial Football Stadium in Midnapore. Among those who spoke at this meeting were Ajoy Mukherjee, a Tamluk parishioner who would later lead the breakaway 'Bangla Congress', the Mahishya leader Nikunja Maity, also from Midnapore, Jadabendranath Panja from Burdwan (who, it will be recalled, had recently joined with Atulya Ghosh in leading the Jatiya Banga Sangathan Samiti) and Abdus Sattar, a Muslim stalwart, also from Burdwan. All key men in the new regional alliance, they pilloried the refugees as rude upstarts, country cousins who had ignominiously run away from home in the hope of grabbing power in another people's country. In his tirade, Maity denounced Prafulla Ghosh's ministry for 'following the old politics of the Muslim League ministry [by] taking no interest in West Bengal people'. For his part, Panja insisted that 'West Bengal people were not in a position to give shelter to all east

[20] The term *Bangaal* literally means a native of eastern Bengal, but it had pejorative connotations, implying that these people were unsophisticated backwoodsmen or country bumpkins; Ghotis were (more sophisticated) people of West Bengal.

[21] In September 1947, 'Burdwan Congress members of the Anti-Khadi group representing several West Bengal districts ... passed a resolution protesting against the transfer to West Bengal of a large number of officers and men domiciled in east Bengal, on the ground that [local] persons having the requisite qualifications [would] be deprived of an adequate share in the administration of the Province': extract dated 6 September 1947, GB IB File No. 20/47/Burdwan.

Bengal Hindus' and even branded the eastern Bengal refugees as potential fifth columnists, claiming that 'the West Bengal people could not rely on the east Bengal people to help West Bengal if there is any fight between India and Pakistan'.[22] In January 1948, when Prafulla Ghosh visited Midnapore just before he was forced out of office, the caucus led by Ajoy Mukherjee raised black flags – in India, a symbol of denunciation – at demonstrations all over the district against their hapless rival, shouting slogans demanding to know 'why greater facilities [should] be given to East Bengalis when the unemployment question of this place remains unresolved'.[23] Long after Atulya Ghosh had captured the Bengal Congress, through his paper *Jana Sevak* he kept up this ugly war of words against refugees from eastern Bengal.[24]

The aim of this propaganda was, of course, to force out or emasculate all the key politicians from East Bengal within the Congress party of the West. But the consequences of this campaign went further than this objective. The Congress's hurling of anti-*Bangaal* slogans against refugees alienated the immigrants from the east, already incensed by the state government's failure to give them relief or help them resettle; and the attack on the East Bengal Congress bosses by the ruling group steadily forced out from the Congress organisation precisely those politicians best able to placate their angry refugee constituents and keep them on side. The Hooghly politicians made the mistake of regarding the refugees as temporary interlopers, 'a floating population on whom the seekers of election cannot reasonably count'.[25] They failed to recognise that the refugees from East Bengal would continue to pour into West Bengal and that they would stay on there, despite government blandishments, creating ever larger and ever more bitter pools of discontent. Nor did they realise that the very force of their numbers, the fact that they were concentrated in particular localities and were politically organised and

[22] DIB Officer's report dated 16 October 1947, GB IB File No. 20–47/Midnapore.

[23] Note dated 15 January 1948, *ibid.* Even after Dr Roy won the premier's crown, many Congressmen in West Bengal continued to harp on the anti-refugee theme. In May 1948, at the Hooghly group conference of 'West Bengal provincial workers', all the speeches had a strident, unattractive anti-east Bengali tone. One rabble-rouser warned Congressmen from east Bengal against thinking of coming to West Bengal in the hope of taking over the province: Sen Gupta, *The Congress party in West Bengal*, p. 29. The unattractive, anti-immigrant mood of the campaign can be gauged in the dismissive description by one speaker of East Bengalis being 'nothing but interlopers', who had abandoned their people to 'the tender mercy of the League'; they were chastised for being untrustworthy and power-hungry 'deserters': S. Roy to Jawaharlal Nehru, 7 July 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1949.

[24] Ajit Sengupta to Jawaharlal Nehru, 12 May 1952, AICC-II, PB-21/1952.

[25] SP DIB Nadia to SSP, Intelligence Branch, 28 July 1948, GB IB File No. 1238–47 (Nabadwip).

active, would make these refugees a political force possessing a growing influence at the ballot box, with which they would have to contend. Soon after partition, there were signs that the easterners could crucially affect the outcome of key elections: for example, in the embarrassing defeat in June 1949 of the Congress candidate in the by-election at South Calcutta, a constituency dominated by East Bengal refugees.[26] But this outcome was dismissed as an anomaly, the result of an inadequate campaign by the Congress. Again in 1955, a convention of refugee Congressmen in touch with the grass roots sounded a cautionary note when they warned their party leaders that 'it would be a folly to ignore the feelings and the legitimate demand[s] of about 70 lakhs of displaced inhabitants', telling them that 'such folly [might] upset the political equilibrium of today, if they were allowed thoughtlessly to be shut out of the Congress and fall unwittingly into the hands of subversive political influences'.[27] But the new officers in command of the West Bengal Congress, having purged the hive of the queen bees from East Bengal, did not heed these warnings. Not only did they do nothing to address the growing crisis which the influx of refugees had created, they made no effort to win the political support of these immigrants and their leaders. Inevitably, many East Bengali leaders quit the Congress[28] and either formed new parties of their own[29] or, in an ominous trend, threw their weight behind the ever more powerful left-wing opposition to Congress.

These unwelcome trends began to emerge at a time when the Congress government urgently needed to recruit new allies and to consolidate its traditional bases of support. The Hooghly-dominated West Bengal Congress spoke for the bhadralok, both urban and rural, of the south-central districts. It had also staked out a credible claim to speak more broadly for the bhadralok of the province as a whole, whose interests for a decade and more had been threatened by Muslim League ministries. The new government saw as its mission the restoration of confidence among

[26] In the family tradition, Sarat Bose put himself forward as the voice of all and sundry who were against the government and the establishment. He received 19,300 votes and won the seat. By comparison, the rival Congress candidate, Suresh Das, got only 5,570 votes.

[27] 'Statement of the displaced Congress workers convention', enclosure in Chairman of the Reception Committee to S. N. Agarwal, 30 March 1955, AICC-II, PB 21/1955.

[28] Surendra Mohan Ghosh more or less retired from active politics and took up the post of deputy high comissioner in Dacca in 1948.

[29] In May 1951, Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh and his entire bloc defected from Congress. Along with Achraya Kripalani, his erstwhile mentor and former president of the All-India Congress Committee, they set up the Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party (KMPP). See Myron Weiner, *Party politics in India. The development of a multi-party system*, Princeton, 1957, pp. 84–90.

the Hindu middle classes of West Bengal.[30] Turning against refugees from East Bengal and ignoring their needs would, before long, divide the Hindu middle classes but, for the moment, this policy enabled the Hooghly coalition successfully to woo its core constituency and to stand forth unashamedly as the defender of bhadralok interests in West Bengal. It also enabled it to give priority to cementing its alliance with the Calcutta establishment. Making Dr Roy the premier, despite the fact that he was not an elected member of the Assembly, was the first step in the plan of action. Dr Roy's appointment of the financier, Nalini Ranjan Sarkar, as minister for finance, commerce and industries, was the next. Sarkar, another of the 'Big Five' of Calcutta, had an ambiguous relationship with the Bengal Congress and had not won a seat in the Assembly. But he was a wealthy businessman who, as erstwhile member for commerce in the viceroy's Executive Council in 1942, had experience of government at the highest levels. Appointing Sarkar to take charge of finance and to be the self-evident 'number two' in government was a controversial move, which struck a conservative and discordant note in a polity that was moving into an era of full democracy. But, by putting this undemotic figure into a key job, the Hooghly cabal hoped to restore the market's confidence and calm the jangled nerves of the commercial and propertied classes of Calcutta.[31]

Bidhan Roy's government quickly revealed how it intended to run West Bengal. Roy invited Kiran Sankar Roy, zamindar of Teota in eastern Bengal and leader of the Congress Assembly Party in Dacca, to join his government as home minister, with a law-and-order brief to stamp out the unrest and extremism which had become the hallmarks of Bengal's political life. Kiran Sankar, much to Nehru's irritation,[32] duly banned the

[30] Upon taking office, Dr Roy explained the priorities of his government: 'The policy of my Ministry would be generally to satisfy the needs of the people of the province [of West Bengal]. The Ministry's immediate task is to tackle the food and clothing problem. The second task [is] to utilise the people who had come from east Bengal to West Bengal and lastly, to remove panic among the border population, and if possible, help in the restoration of confidence among the [Hindu] minorities in east Bengal' (S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 77).

[31] Dr Roy managed to persuade West Bengal's largest landowner – a family friend and patient, the Maharaja of Burdwan – to join the Congress. The Maharaja had formerly fought and won elections to the assembly as an independent, but fought the 1952 elections on a Congress ticket: author's interview with Dr P. C. Mahtab (son of the last Maharaja of Burdwan), Calcutta, 27 March 1995. Dr Roy also encouraged the formerly independent business magnate, Prabhu Dayal Himatsingka, to join the Congress; these two moves had the double advantage of shoring up his majority in the Assembly, while sending out the right signals to men of property in Bengal. See S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 96.

[32] Nehru expressed his disapproval in his fortnightly letter to chief ministers dated 1 April 1948, telling them that 'the West Bengal government as you know has banned the

Communist Party in West Bengal and swiftly pushed through a West Bengal Security Act which was even more draconian than the one it replaced.[33] In 1950, government drafted the so-called Eviction Bill to protect urban property-owners against (mainly refugee) squatters, a measure which reaffirmed its commitment to the defence of private property and its resolve to resist pressure from the refugee committees and popular calls for redistributive justice.[34] In 1951, it passed the Calcutta Municipal Act, which restricted the vote in municipal elections to the wealthiest 10 per cent of the city, thus ensuring that property-owners, landlords and shopkeepers would continue to dominate the Calcutta Corporation.[35] The annals of West Bengal show how its government dragged its feet whenever the centre pressed it to enact land reforms, just as the intentional loopholes and carefully crafted small print in the legislation were designed to blunt the effect of the reforms of Bengal's zamindari system when finally they became law in 1953.[36] It is also well known that Roy's government, backed by local Congress committees, systematically subverted laws which were intended to place a ceiling on the size of rural landholdings. They also turned a blind eye to the many devices by which landed interests illegally held on to their property.[37] The government of

Communist Party ... without reference to us ... this procedure is undesirable because any such action leads to repercussions': G. Parthasarathi (ed.), *Jawaharlal Nehru. Letters to chief ministers 1947–1964*, Government of India, Delhi, 1985, vol. I, p. 99.

33 The West Bengal Security (Amendment) Bill, with its harsh provisions, was put to the Assembly in September 1948. It was explicitly designed to 'extend the existing power of controlling processions to cases affecting the safety and stability of the province'. It gave the police greater powers than they had previously possessed to search without warrant and to detain 'under-trials' in custody for up to thirty days, doubling the previous limit of fifteen days, a move that was justified 'in order to facilitate the collection of materials and preparation of necessary papers for consideration of the provincial government': 'West Bengal Security (Amendment) Bill, 1948, With Statement of Objects and Reasons' (issued by the Government of West Bengal Judicial and Legislative Department), 15 September 1948, Kiran Sankar Roy Private Papers (by kind permission of Sri Surjya Sankar Roy).

34 The bill became law in 1951 as the *West Bengal Act XVI of 1951. The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation of Land Act. 1951.*

35 Myron Weiner, *Party building in a new nation. The Indian National Congress*, Chicago, 1967, p. 352.

36 See S. K. Basu and S. K. Bhattacharyya, *Land reforms in West Bengal. A study in implementation*, Calcutta, 1963; Manjula Bose (ed.), *Land reforms in eastern India*, Calcutta, 1981; Pranab Bardhan, 'Dominant classes in India's democracy', in Atul Kohli (ed.), *India's democracy. An analysis of changing state–society relations*, Princeton, 1988; and Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Agrarian reforms and the politics of the left in West Bengal', University of Cambridge, doctoral dissertation, 1993.

37 As one scholar has put it, the system of 'spoils, dispensed to the rural gentry, took the form of opportunities to neutralize the publicly stated egalitarian intentions of the state government': Prasanta Sen Gupta, 'The Congress party in West Bengal. Politics, patronage, and power, 1947–1983', in Rakhahari Chatterji (ed.), *Politics in West Bengal. Institutions, processes and problems*, Calcutta, 1985, p. 33.

West Bengal under Roy was as conservative in the countryside as it was in the towns: it had no intention of backing the forces of change. Its remit was to preserve, and wherever possible to reinstate, the privileges and powers of Bengal's traditional elites.

But the coming of a universal franchise meant that winning the vote of propertied groups, rural gentry, literati and respectable persons of a middling sort was no longer enough for a party that wanted a mandate to rule. Even if bhadralok support for the government had remained rock solid (and, for a host of reasons, it did not), by itself this would not have ensured Congress victory at the polls. As India moved into uncharted waters where democracy ruled, dominant elites in every province were forced to find new and broader bases of political support. In West Bengal, this presented the ruling party with particular difficulties. With the first general elections based on universal franchise fast approaching in 1952 (and there was also a threat that elections might be held earlier in West Bengal than in the rest of India),[38] Roy's narrowly based government had urgently to extend its influence at the base. Bengal's electorate had, of course, been hugely expanded. In the general elections of 1945–6, hardly 2 million people had voted in the constituencies of western Bengal; now more than 12.5 million would be entitled to cast their vote in the same number of boroughs. Not only was the electorate much larger, its composition had been fundamentally altered by partition. The aftershocks of partition, and the huge migrations which it generated, transformed many of the old wards and localities where the Congress had traditionally found support into teeming warrens of anti-establishment discontent.

The Bengal Congress was not well placed, nor was it minded to try, to launch populist campaigns to win backing from the lower orders who now had the vote. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Communist-led *Tebhaga*[39] campaigns, demanding that sharecroppers be given a bigger share of the fruits of their labour, raged through the countryside. In the towns, refugee-led squatter groups began to grab property and students took to the streets to fight pitched battles with the police. In 1948, communist desperados made a daring armed bid, reminiscent of the Chittagong Armoury raid of 1930, to capture the airport and armouries just outside

[38] In 1949, the Delhi government, mindful of the serious allegations of corruption and maladministration against the Bengal ministry, threatened to dissolve the Assembly and hold new elections in West Bengal, well ahead of elections for the rest of the country.

[39] *Tebhaga* literally means 'in three parts'. During the Tebhaga campaigns, sharecroppers, who traditionally were allowed to keep just half of the crops they cultivated for the landlords, demanded a two-thirds share: Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecroppers' struggles in Bengal, 1930–1950*, Calcutta, 1988, pp. 211–42.

Calcutta.[40] The Congress in West Bengal, which saw as its prime mission the quelling of unrest and damping down the fires of disorder, concluded that this was no time to be making populist gestures.

Instead, the party decided to ride out the storm in the time-honoured way, by buying the collaboration in the localities of the men and women who mattered and who commanded support from their less privileged clients. Even before independence, those who claimed to speak for the large Mahishya community had begun to demand rewards for their 'magnificent sacrifices' in the freedom struggle. In June 1947, the Mahishya Samiti asked for two seats in the cabinet and three in the Constituent Assembly in recognition of all they had done 'for the emancipation and independence of India'.[41] The Mahishya caste in Bengal was 3 million strong and constituted, as their spokesman was quick to point out, 'the largest majority-community among the Hindus of the new province'.[42] Government now had to pay heed to this kind of special pleading. If giving lower-caste leaders a few loaves and fishes would help to win the party the vote of their caste-fellows, the Congress was ready to dish them out. Even Prafulla Ghosh had seen the wisdom of giving places in his ministry to the self-styled spokesmen of the lower orders; his cabinet included three 'Harijans'[43] and one Mahishya. When Roy took office, the Mahishyas kept the cabinet post they had been given by Ghosh; their spokesman, Nikunja Behari Maity, was reappointed to the cabinet as minister for co-operatives, credit, relief and rehabilitation. Maity, his critics alleged, with only a third-class master's degree in history and

[40] On 26 February 1948, Pritish De, Amar Raha and twenty-four others from the Revolutionary Communist Party of India led a meticulously planned and simultaneous set of armed assaults on Dumdum Airport, Dumdum jail, Jessop & Company's munitions factory and the gun factory at Kashipore. They held Basirhat town hostage for twenty-four hours before they were overpowered by the police: author's interview with Pritish De, Calcutta, 26 March 1995. Three policemen were killed in the stand-off with the raiders. Three British managers of Jessops died when angry workers pushed them into the factory's furnace.

[41] Resolution of a meeting of the Jessore District Mahishya Samiti at Bordia on 25 June 1947, enclosed in Kamini Sankar Roy to the President, Indian National Congress, 27 June 1947, AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1948.

[42] *Ibid.*

[43] 'Harijan', literally the people of God, was the term coined by Gandhi to describe members of the so-called untouchable castes. The three were Hem Chandra Naskar, who won the Scheduled Caste seat for the 24 Parganas South-East on a Congress ticket, Mohini Mohan Burman, returned on a Congress ticket to the Scheduled Caste seat in Jalpaiguri-cum-Siliguri, and Radhanath Das, Scheduled Caste member for Hooghly North-East. In July 1947, Kripalani chided his Bengali friend and ally for 'conceding' the demand from Harijans for three seats in his cabinet, arguing that this created 'a dangerous precedent': Acharya Kripalani to Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, 9 July 1947, AICC-II, PB-3(1)/1948.

having failed his law examinations, was unqualified for ministerial responsibility, particularly in the demanding role of refugee rehabilitation. But what Maity had in plenty was talent in the arts of buying political support and exercising patronage: '[with] a small party of his own [he had] held before his party men the false hopes of providing them with high posts, contracts and other improvements'.[44] Maity would remain a minister in Roy's government for many years, and later his niece, Abha Maity, also found a place in the inner caucus of the Bengal Congress. Mahishya factions were prominent among those groups that did well politically on the swings and roundabouts of partition. In 1918, only three Mahishyas had been allowed a seat on the high table of nationalist Bengal. By 1958, there were as many as 26 Mahishyas among the 330 or so most powerful politicians of the province.[45]

As other lower-caste organisations leapt on to this bandwagon and began to make demands of their own,[46] Dr Roy created parliamentary secretaryships and deputy speakerships in the Assembly and more jobs in the civil supply department to be distributed in exchange for the promise of political support. One critic alleged that twelve of the thirteen Scheduled Caste members in the Assembly had, quite simply, been bought by being 'showered with loaves and fishes', receiving a veritable treasure-trove of three ministerships, seven parliamentary secretaryships, one deputy speakership and one lucrative job in the Civil Supplies Department.[47] In the summer of 1948, when Dr Roy's ministry faced

[44] B. D. Mahapatra to AICC General Secretary (no date), AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1948; and B. D. Mahapatra to Dr P. C. Ghosh, 28 August 1947, *ibid.*

[45] By 1958, Mahishyas were over 12 per cent of the caste Hindu leaders in Congress, a seven-fold increase compared with forty years before. These figures are based on a comparative table in Myron Weiner, *Political change in South Asia*, Calcutta, 1963, pp. 216–18 (reproduced in table 5.4). Weiner's figures for 1918 are based on the Sedition Committee Report of that year, which listed only those top leaders who the government believed had terrorist connections; so the comparison does have its shortcomings. But it shows that after 1947 Mahishyas entered the mainstream of politics in much larger numbers and at much higher levels than before.

[46] In 1956, the secretary of the Yadava Mahasabha reminded the Congress bosses that there were more than a million of them, but only one Yadava member of the Legislative Assembly in Bengal and a mere handful with seats on the district and municipal boards. Asking Congress to nominate more Yadavas, their spokesman sounded a not very subtle warning that, 'as there are many political parties in the state, Congress should not give any chance to the members of our community to think that they are totally forsaken by the Congress': Honorary Secretary, All-India Yadava Mahasabha to K. P. Madhavan Nair, 10 August 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

[47] Sudhindra Lal Roy, 'The political palimpsest of West Bengal', *New India*, 6 July 1949. The AICC took note, and soon afterwards ordered West Bengal to go to the polls. This suggests that Delhi was aware of the charge that West Bengal's government was pursuing this cynical policy of buying political support. A photocopied and annotated copy of the article is filed in AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1949.

another serious challenge, he responded by unashamedly setting out to win over more erstwhile Muslim Leaguers. By 1958, thirty-five Muslims had joined the privileged ranks of the top Congress leadership in West Bengal.[48] Of the twenty-five Bengalis who held ministerial posts in that year, whether at the centre or in the state, six were Muslims.[49]

By all accounts, these cynical efforts to buy support at the top were matched at lower levels by a phenomenon colourfully described by one political scientist as 'licence-permit raj'. Independent India was a more interventionist state than British India had been. It had to be: India needed development. After 1953, when planning became the order of the day, the centre allocated large resources to the states for investment in development projects, producing as a by-product a complex system of graft, with permits becoming the currency of political patronage. Thousands of licences to set up industries or trade in controlled commodities were given by government to its friends and allies in return for political support.[50] The West Bengal regime was not alone in liberally dispensing such patronage, whether to cement old alliances or to build new ones. But, in the political and economic aftermath of partition, Bengal's new rulers had particularly powerful incentives and opportunities to deploy this patronage. In West Bengal, partition broke the back of the province's transport network. Putting it to rights called for state investment in road- and bridge-building on a massive scale. Severe shortages of food and cloth meant the rationing and regulation of trade in these essential goods. Government controlled these sectors, giving it patronage on an unprecedented scale. Bus licences, for example, became highly prized counters in the political marketplace; and permits to trade in controlled commodities were little more than licences to print money. These became the currency of patronage by which politicians sought to fortify and to extend the bases of their support.

Saroj Chakrabarty recalls that '[in 1948] the West Bengal Government opened many fair-priced shops and Dr Roy encouraged Bengalis to come forward and take advantage. He asked Bengali young men to take transport business and taxi and bus permits ... Large number[s] of permits were issued from time to time by the Civil Supplies Department for importing pulses, rice, mustard oil etc.'[51] Dr Roy's intention was to give most of these licences to middle-class youths – to 'freedom fighters' and 'political sufferers'[52] – as part of his drive to address the increasingly

[48] Weiner, *Political change in South Asia*, p. 217. [49] *Ibid.*, p. 204.
[50] Myron Weiner, *The politics of scarcity. Public pressure and political response in India*, Chicago, 1962, pp. 118–23.
[51] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 81. [52] *Ibid.*

worrying problem of white-collar unemployment and to reward loyal clients.[53] Advisory boards set up by the Civil Supplies Department to issue licences were, by government's explicit fiat, manned by members of union boards and municipalities, medical practitioners, schoolteachers, pleaders and *muktears* (or lawyers) as well as representatives of union and district Congress Committees,[54] qualifications which might as well have openly announced that these licences were intended only for the Congress party and its core middle-class constituents and that no one else need bother to apply. One critic described the result as a 'pernicious system of distribution of patronage in the form of . . . licences, permits and dealerships . . . to Congressmen by those in authority to consolidate their own political power'.[55]

But as Saroj Chakrabarty himself admitted, it proved impossible to prevent the licences from becoming commodities in their own right, auctioned to the highest bidder. Very soon, 'cunning traders' and 'business friends' of leaders, officials and politicians, scenting profit in the burgeoning black market in licensed goods, became the *benami*[56] owners of more and more of these profitable licences.[57] The Calcutta Corporation, taken over by Atulya Ghosh as leader of the Congress Municipal Association, came to be the epicentre of a system by which patronage, licences and contracts were handed out to friendly businessmen by standing committees packed with Atulya's placemen.[58]

By the late 1950s, trading and commercial castes at every level were more conspicuously involved in the Congress party and its transactions in West Bengal than ever before. Upper-caste bhadralok Bengal, after the early comprador days of the Raj, had proved notoriously averse to commerce, preferring the solid rewards of land ownership and being rentiers,

[53] As one senior Congressman complained to the high command, 'very often Congressmen are allowed or nominated to serve [on] committees primarily meant for distributing permits and licenses. Favourite party workers are thus allowed to exert "influence" over local officials and thereby gather greedy [members of the] public with them. The West Bengal Government has ordered their officials to seek guidance of local Congress workers in many matters . . . This invites nepotism and corruption': Satyendra Mohan Chattopadhyaya, Member, WBPCC Executive Council, to AICC General Secretary (undated), AICC-II, PB-3/1948.

[54] *Government of West Bengal, Department of Civil Supplies, Order No. 8004 DCS*, dated 23 June 1948, enclosed in Prafulla Chandra Sen to AICC Office Secretary, 16 February 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1949.

[55] H. K. Sarkar to AICC President, 5 September 1948, in AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1948.

[56] 'Benami' refers to a system of illegal ownership using nominees, whether of property or licences and permits, which became widespread at this time.

[57] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 81.

[58] Sen Gupta, *The Congress party in West Bengal*, p. 34; and Ali Ashraf, *City government in Calcutta*, Bombay, 1966.

and respectable employment in the services and professions. In consequence, much of the province's trade and commerce had come to be controlled by middle castes or by non-Bengalis, Marwaris prominent among them. Before partition, Marwari big businessmen did have a role, mainly behind the scenes, in the Bengal Congress and in Bengal's politics more generally, but the party and its political agenda were unmistakably dominated by the Bengali bhadralok and its particular concerns. Subtle changes were now taking place as traders, petty entrepreneurs, businessmen and opportunists of all sorts became more visibly active in party-political affairs.[59] Some of these people were, of course, middle-class Bengalis who took advantage of the new opportunities in trade, as finding employment in the professions and services grew ever more difficult and competitive. But most were non-Bengalis, who became an increasingly important part of a changing political firmament as the Congress party was forced to venture outside its traditional bases to seek new supporters.[60] Indeed, within a decade, the West Bengal Congress had become so dependent on non-Bengalis that even Nehru in faraway Delhi noticed the change, asking Atulya Ghosh in 1958 why 'in Calcutta, the strength of the Congress, such as it is, lies more with the non-Bengali elements there'.[61]

Another trend was the rise of a new breed of rather shady political entrepreneurs and middlemen, whose stock in trade was to barter votes in return for commercial favours, and to whom scores of licences were now dished out for distribution. In the sprawling shanty towns where refugee-run neighbourhood societies and communist-led *bustee* committees had become focal points for anti-Congress feeling, slum landlords, who had the wherewithal to intimidate their numerous and impoverished tenants, 'campaigned' for the Congress. In return, the ruling party granted them dealerships and turned a blind eye to their illegal squatting on land

[59] The AICC files of these years contain hundreds of complaints against the 'nexus' between leading politicians – in particular the minister for civil supplies, Prafulla Chandra Sen – and wealthy (and allegedly corrupt) businessmen. See, for instance, Mubarak Mazdoor to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 July 1949, alleging that Prafulla Chandra Sen and Sheo Kumar Datta, who went on to become chairman of the Bengal Textile and Iron Control Advisory Board, had made a shady deal (AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1949); or M. Ghoshal to P. Sitaramayya (undated), alleging that a non-Bengali (Jagat Bhausan Datta) president of the Champadanga Union Congress Committee and member of the Hooghly DCC executive committee was not only a black-marketeer but had been convicted for wrongdoing (AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1948).

[60] Kochanek's survey of the 8,594 'active' members in the West Bengal Congress in 1958 showed that as many as 1,330, or over 15 per cent, were businessmen: Stanley Kochanek, *The Congress party of India. The dynamics of one-party democracy*, Princeton, 1968, p. 347.

[61] Nehru to Atulya Ghosh, 4 July 1958, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 387.

which belonged to others or their systematic theft of electricity.[62] Swaggering *mastaans*, neighbourhood bully boys and vigilantes, who controlled by force the increasingly lawless and desperate inhabitants of tenements, were another unattractive element in the new 'machine' politics of West Bengal.[63]

By such devices, the West Bengal Congress somehow succeeded after partition and independence in broadening the base of its support. But in the process the tiger significantly, if subtly, had to change its stripes. Once overwhelmingly the party of Bengali-speaking high-caste bhadralok and dedicated to promoting their interests and safeguarding their traditions, the Bengal Congress now had to draw more of its support from quite different sorts of people. Businessmen and financiers, often migrants from other parts of India who spoke little Bengali and took little interest in Bengali high culture, traders and entrepreneurs large and small, bosses of and spokesmen for intermediate and low castes, leaders, sometimes former Muslim Leaguers, of Muslim communities, slumlords and their bully boys – all came to play a part in a complex system by which the Congress made friends by distributing patronage. These new allies played a critical role in every election that the Congress won in West Bengal until 1967. Table 5.4 examines changes in the composition of the Bengal leadership by caste and community between 1918 and 1958, and reveals how deep these changes went.

In time these changes in the Congress took their toll. Inevitably, they began to alienate some of its traditional supporters. This was particularly evident in Calcutta, where many of the city's young literati, in the past reliable foot-soldiers of the party, grew increasingly disillusioned as the party and government appeared to be ready to abandon them and their

[62] The AICC papers (mainly the second instalment) contain many letters complaining bitterly about how corrupt the provincial party leaders had become. A typical example, which gives a hint at how the system worked, is contained in a letter from Bina Pani Devi of Hazarinagar in the 24 Parganas. In the summer of 1948, she complained to Rajendra Prasad that the secretary of the Hazarinagar Congress Committee was a criminal, whom the courts in Barrackpore had found guilty in 1942 of 'breach of trust' and 'moral turpitude'. 'He has now created a party from among the millhands and is making money by cheating ... in the name of the Congress.' She went on to allege that this man had 'succeeded in ingratiating himself' with Bepin Behari Ganguly, MLA and secretary of the 24 Parganas District Congress Committee: Bina Pani Devi to Dr Rajendra Prasad (undated, but its place in the file suggests it was received in May–June 1948), AICC-I, PC-4/1947–49.

[63] The Bengal Chamber of Commerce concluded in a study that, by the late 1960s, 'underworld' elements, 'goondas, mastans and delinquents', had become an undeniably powerful feature of state politics: *West Bengal. An analytical study*, Calcutta, 1971, pp. 129–40. See also Suranjan Das and Jayanta K. Ray, *The goondas. Towards a reconstruction of the Calcutta underworld*, Calcutta, 1996; and Sajal Basu, *Politics of violence. A case study of West Bengal*, Calcutta, 1982.

Table 5.4. *Caste: Sedition Committee Report of 1918 versus West Bengal leadership, 1958*

Sedition Committee Report, 1918	Number	% of total	West Bengal leadership, 1958	Number	% of total
Brahmin	65	34.9	Brahmin	91	27.1
Kayastha	87	46.8	Kayastha	64	19.0
Vaidya	13	7.0	Vaidya	13	3.9
Rajput	1	0.5	Ugra Kshatriya	6	1.8
Tanti	1	0.5	Marwari	7	2.1
Mahishya	3	1.6	Bhumi	4	1.2
Subarnabanik	1	0.5	Other Hindus	34	10.1
Vaishya	1	0.5	Mahishya	26	7.7
Karmakar	1	0.5	Anglo-Indians	4	1.2
Kaibarta	3	1.6	Muslims	34	10.4
Barui	1	0.5	Scheduled Castes	29	8.6
Saha	2	1.1	Tribals	23	6.8
Europeans and Eurasians	4	2.2	Santhals	13	3.9
Sudra	1	0.5			
Uriya	1	0.5			
Mudi	1	0.5			
TOTAL	**186**		**TOTAL**	**336**	

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: Myron Weiner, *Political change in South Asia*, Calcutta, 1963, p. 217.

interests in favour of a new breed of allies.[64] Others, prime exemplars of traditional service communities with their staid middle-class morality and their self-serving prejudices, did not like the growing prominence in the party of traders and businessmen.[65] Salaried clerical workers and

[64] The AICC papers contain numerous protests from disillusioned Congressmen. A typical example was the complaint from Dhirendranath Chatterjee, former chairman of the Baranagar Mondal Congress Committee to Dr B. C. Roy, against the new chairman, Tulsidas Ghosh. The new man, Chatterjee alleged, had been associated in the past with a gymnastic club through which he had developed connections with local criminals or *goondas*. In turn this was what had enabled him to act as mediator between jute workers and management and to extort money from both sides. Ghosh allegedly took bribes from cloth-dealers and coal-shop owners (presumably to secure or extend their dealerships and permits), and 'bartered the Mandal Congress Committee's support to the Chairman of the Municipality . . . in exchange for cash': Dhirendranath Chatterjee to Dr B. C. Roy (date unclear, probably November 1955), AICC-II, PB-21/1955.

[65] One district Congressman warned that care should be taken in preparing the electoral roll in Bankura: 'At a time when our organisation is sought to be entered into by various sorts

students, hard hit by white-collar unemployment and by inflation, resented the fact that their party favoured people with lesser qualifications than their own,[66] who made 'easy' money while they were losing the struggle to maintain even a semblance of their old ways of life. By 1958, even distant Delhi could see that the Bengal Congress was in imminent danger of losing support in Calcutta, 'the heart of Bengal', by alienating its 'young men' and its 'intellectuals'.[67]

This phenomenon was not limited to Calcutta. There were clear signs of a growing disillusionment outside Calcutta, particularly in the northern districts of West Bengal, among those who had stuck by the party in its lean years. Dominated by a particular set of core districts, the Congress regime began to squander its influence in districts outside this charmed circle, where partymen felt excluded from the division of the spoils. From 1948 onwards, representatives of north Bengal district Congress committees bitterly complained that they were ignored and disenfranchised inside their own party. Their constituencies, they alleged, were either being wound up on the grounds that they had been 'partitioned',[68] or that their seats were being taken by 'outsiders', the friends and allies of the Hooghly group.[69] There were so many of these complaints that eventually the Congress high command had no choice but to look into them. The fact that Rajendra Prasad saw fit to issue a sharp rebuke to Bengal's leaders on this matter suggests that there was merit in the claim that the legitimate interests of the northern

of persons for personal aggrandisement, care should be taken to safeguard it against such self-seekers': Suresh Chandra Palit, Secretary, Bankura DCC, to the AICC General Secretary, 9 February 1948, AICC-I, PC-4/1946–48.

66 One longstanding Congressman, and clearly (as his name suggests) from the top drawer of the caste hierarchy, complained that the man who took his place as chairman of the Barangar Mandal Congress Committee was 'barely literate' and had 'no English': D. N. Chatterjee to Dr B. C. Roy (date unclear, probably November 1955), AICC-II, PB-21/1955.

67 Nehru to Atulya Ghosh, 4 July 1948, cited in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 387.

68 See, for instance, Prafulla Ghosh to Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel, telegram dated 24 March 1948, complaining that the incumbents in the West Bengal Assembly of seats from Malda and West Dinajpur in the north had been ousted on the specious grounds that their constituencies had been partitioned: Rajendra Prasad Papers, File No. 23-C/48.

69 A celebrated, but not untypical, example was the case of Kiran Sankar Roy. When Dr Bidhan Roy asked Kiran Sankar Roy from Dacca to join his government, he had to find him a seat quickly. He was given Malda-cum-West Dinajpur in the north, even though the local Malda DCC preferred the local man who represented them in the Assembly. Despite a howl of protest from all the district, union and village Congress committees, Kiran Sankar Roy's nomination was pushed through: Subodh Kumar Misra, President, Malda DCC, to Rajendra Prasad, Secretary, AICC, 22 April 1948; and Ramhari Roy to Rajendra Prasad, 20 April 1948, both in AICC-II, PB-3(i)/1948.

districts had been sacrificed to cement the power of a narrow ruling clique.[70]

In the long run, this process was to sap such coherence and strength as the Congress organisation had once possessed in these parts of Bengal. The Congress had never really made the effort to establish footholds in these northern districts.[71] Now they came to feel that they were the Cinderellas of the new Bengal, deprived, after the midnight hour when independence had been won, of their rightful share of resources. In 1971, a study by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce showed that these districts were 'in a sorry plight of stagnation and decay'.[72] By the late 1960s (as the 1971 report showed), the northern districts – particularly Malda, West Dinajpur, Cooch Behar, Murshidabad and Jalpaiguri – had fallen far behind the districts of the south. Far fewer resources had been invested in the infrastructure of these districts, and far less had been done to develop their economies (see table 5.5). They had, moreover, received a significantly smaller share of government patronage by way of permits and licences than the districts favoured by the Congress (see table 5.6). Surveys in the 1970s which ranked the districts of West Bengal according to the standards of living of their people came to the same conclusion: West Dinajpur, Malda, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar were the poorest districts of the state, while Burdwan, Howrah and Hooghly, the domestic parishes of the Congress bosses, were the most prosperous.[73] It is hardly surprising that those who lived in the disadvantaged districts blamed a

[70] As Rajendra Prasad instructed Roy, it was good practice to consult District Committees on the choice of a candidate: '[t]his is necessary because the District from which he stands has to return him and the District Congress Committee naturally is interested in the person to be elected and also in seeing that the right person is nominated whom it could support before the electorate': Rajendra Prasad to Dr B. C. Roy, 4 July 1948, AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1948.

[71] As table 5.2 shows, in 1947 the four northern districts of Darjeeling, Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Malda between them had fewer than 20,000 primary Congress members, less than a single ward in Calcutta (North Calcutta alone had 20,121 members, and South Calcutta almost as many).

[72] By 1970 West Bengal had wider regional disparities in development than any other Indian state. See *West Bengal. An analytical study*, pp. 44–50. The 1961 census showed that 'Jalpaiguri, West Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Bankura, Birbhum and Purulia [were] the districts which are below the State average on all three counts of literacy, *viz.* total, rural and urban.' By contrast 'Calcutta, Howrah, Hooghly and Burdwan' were above the state averages in literacy: *1961 Census*, p. 115. This was not a result simply of higher levels of urbanisation, since the rural tracts Hooghly and Howrah also came top of the tables for literacy in the countryside, as did the district of Midnapur.

[73] Biswajit Chatterjee, 'Poverty in West Bengal. What have we learnt?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 November 1998. 'District development indices' show much the same pattern: Sarmila Banerjee and Samik Ray, 'On construction of district development index in West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 November 1998.

Table 5.5. *Levels of development among districts of West Bengal*

District	Area under double crop, % of net area sown	Gross area irrigated, % of gross area sown	Cultivators and agricultural labourers, % of rural working population	Workers in household industry, % of rural working population	Crude literacy rate	Workers in manufacturing per 1,000 of total population	Miles of surfaced road per 1,000 square miles of area	Establishments run on electricity, % of all industrial establishments	Workers in registered factories, % of all workers
Darjeeling	12.6	20.1	49.17	1.69	287	8	251	8.80	3.34
Jalpaiguri	9.2	22.6	49.39	1.13	192	6	222	1.73	3.92
Cooch Behar	20.4	4.2	86.79	2.40	210	5	148	1.55	0.16
West Dinajpur	23.5	3.0	87.85	2.26	171	5	107	0.47	0.39
Malda	28.1	5.3	66.48	12.81	138	6	119	0.60	0.03
Nadia	47.7	1.9	70.98	9.01	272	18	276	3.83	0.70
24 Parganas	14.8	7.7	72.81	2.69	325	21	203	9.66	12.40
Hooghly	10.3	37.5	68.64	4.23	347	20	389	5.48	10.70
Howrah	15.3	22.8	45.12	3.24	369	31	415	20.36	22.78
Midnapore	6.9	29.9	80.57	5.43	273	8	156	1.09	1.21
Bankura	5.1	35.7	81.37	5.82	231	10	266	1.45	0.47
Birbhum	9.7	64.3	78.74	4.67	221	9	180	2.34	1.12
Burdwan	6.0	41.8	56.49	3.05	296	38	273	7.10	5.75
Purulia	7.7	35.9	86.78	3.14	178	9	121	1.83	0.42

Source: Bengal Chamber of Commerce, *West Bengal. An analytical study*, Calcutta, 1971, p. 51.

Table 5.6. *Distribution of industrial licences among the most developed districts in West Bengal, 1953–1961*

Districts	No. of licences
Calcutta	567
Howrah	126
24 Parganas	115
Hooghly	65
Burdwan	37
Nadia	12
Jalpaiguri	2
Darjeeling	1
TOTAL	925

Note: Only two districts of West Bengal at the lower levels of development acquired industrial licences.
Source: Bengal Chamber of Commerce, *West Bengal. An analytical study*, Calcutta, 1971, pp. 48–9.

government whose close connections with the 'core' prosperous (and politically dominant) southern districts were there for all to see.

In time, bhadralok Bengal's disenchantment with the Congress party and government grew to be deep and widespread. This 'malady', as Nehru described it, had complex causes, and so did the drift of the Bengali intelligentsia into radical and extreme left-wing politics.[74] But part of the explanation undoubtedly lies in changes within the Congress party after partition. The way in which the Congress, after partition, was captured by a cabal from the southern districts who monopolised the perquisites of office caused deep resentment. Atulya Ghosh, the grand-master of this strategy, was cordially and universally disliked: as one critic told Nehru, 'the very name of Atulya Babu [was] irksome to the general public of all strata' and the 'overwhelming majority of the Congress general members shudder[ed] at his very name'.[75] The stench of corruption that came to permeate the West Bengal Congress as it ignominiously cast around for new allies was another cause of the growing disillusionment with the party, particularly among Bengal's politicised and idealistic

[74] See, for instance, Sumanta Banerjee, *In the wake of Naxalbari. A history of the Naxalite movement in India*, Calcutta, 1980; Marcus Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, MA, 1971; David M. Laushey, *Bengal terrorism and the Marxist left*, Calcutta, 1975; Rabindra Ray, *The Naxalities and their ideology*, New Delhi, 1988; Bhabani Sengupta, *Communism in Indian politics*, New York, 1972; Ross Mallick, *Indian communism. Opposition, collaboration and institutionalisation*, Delhi, 1994.

[75] S. Chakravarty to Jawaharlal Nehru, 29 May 1956, AICC-II, PB-21/1956.

students and young people. Its traditional supporters from the 'respectable' professional classes felt increasingly alienated from a party which flirted with groups it had ignored in the past, whether low castes, tribal peoples, Muslims or non-Bengalis. In their eyes, the Congress had become markedly less reputable, less cultured and altogether less bhadra as a result. It no longer represented their aspirations, their culture or their values.

In retrospect, the Hooghly group's capture of post-partition Bengal turned out to have been a pyrrhic victory. It managed to cling to power for twenty years after partition despite huge changes in the political landscape. But it did so by sacrificing much of the Bengal Congress's historical identity, its central mission, its core purposes and its traditional sources of support.

West Bengal and all-India: the end of the affair

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, another pervasive cause of the growing malaise in West Bengal was the failure of the regime to make good the social and economic dislocations of partition. Far from putting the divided province back on the path to prosperity, Dr Roy's government, despite its best efforts, presided over West Bengal's economic decline from the top of India's premier league to a lowly place in the second division. In 1971, a study by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry drew a damning picture of decay and decline right across the board in most significant sectors of West Bengal's economy.[76] In 1950, West Bengal had the highest per capita income of any province in the country. By 1966, it had dropped to number eight in the national league. Its per capita income in 1966 was well below the average, having declined in absolute terms by 2 per cent, and by over 15 per cent relative to the rest of India.[77] Between 1951 and 1965, Bengal's industrial output grew at a snail's pace in comparison with that of other provinces.[78] In India as a whole, between 1951 and 1961, the proportion of workers increased from 38.9 per cent to 42.8 per cent, whereas in West Bengal it declined, falling from 35 per cent to 33 per cent. In that decade, Bengal also lagged behind other Indian states in agriculture. It variously took twelfth, tenth and ninth place in India for growth between 1952 and 1965 using the key agrarian measures of agricultural production, area under cultivation, and

[76] Only the services grew, but not sufficiently to provide employment for West Bengal's large and highly educated middle classes.

[77] R. Roy, *The agony of West Bengal*, p. 93.

[78] Between 1951 and 1965, West Bengal's gross ex-factory value of output grew by 286 per cent compared, for example, with a 345 per cent growth in Bombay (Gujarat and Maharashtra combined), 351 per cent in Madras and a massive 1,145 per cent in the Punjab and Haryana: *West Bengal. An analytical study*, p. 40.

productivity gauged by yield per acre. By every one of these standards, West Bengal's agrarian growth had been far slower than the national average.[79] In 1962, poverty measured according to accepted yardsticks was the normal condition of 62 per cent of West Bengal's population, compared with 38 per cent for India as a whole. By 1967–8, 'poverty' among Bengalis had risen to a staggering 80 per cent.[80] West Bengal, relatively affluent in 1947, had become the poor relation of India by the mid-1960s, a province in danger of terminal economic decline and its people seemingly condemned to irremediable misery.

Already by the mid-1950s, the notion that West Bengal's economy would recover swiftly and easily from the shocks of partition had proved to be deeply misconceived. The architects of partition gravely underestimated the damage that such a division would wreak on its economy. Centuries of unified administration had given the regions of undivided Bengal a measure of interconnectedness and interdependence which had encouraged a symbiotic prosperity in the economies of east and west: the fertile agrarian east produced food grains and essential raw materials which supplied the cities and factories of the industrialised west, and also in return consumed many of West Bengal's finished goods. This intricate and mutually beneficial web of trade and exchange was now suddenly ripped apart. Leaving aside a few studies in the 1950s,[81] economists and historians have failed to calculate the effects of this damaging rupture of the fabric of Bengal's economy. This is not the place to try to fill that gap, but the headlines are only too clear. Partition abruptly cut West Bengal off from vital supplies of food and raw materials from the east. It slammed shut the doors to the market in the east for many of its most valuable manufactures. It severed, or at least seriously disrupted, the transport networks by which the undivided region had exported its produce to markets, whether in India or overseas, and had carried goods and people economically and efficiently throughout Bengal.

It is true, of course, that West Bengal's industrial economy had not been in rude health even before partition. Its industries, for the most part, processed raw materials for export. Before the Second World War, these

[79] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[80] Amiya Kumar Bagchi, 'Studies on the economy of West Bengal since independence', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 November 1998, p. 2977.

[81] The most comprehensive study of the economic consequences of partition is Vir Virender Singh Tyagi, 'The economic impact of partition on Indian agriculture and related industries', American University, Washington, DC, doctoral dissertation, 1958. Other studies published in the 1950s include S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*; A. A. Anwar, *Effects of partition on industries in the border districts of Lahore and Sialkot*, Lahore, 1953; and C. N. Vakil, *Economic consequences of divided India. A study of the economy of India and Pakistan*, Bombay, 1950.

enterprises were owned and run in the main by British firms, and capital investment into key industries fell dramatically during the recession of the 1930s. The war boosted profits, but wartime shortages of machinery and restrictions on capital issue and foreign exchange meant that capital plant and machinery, already showing signs of age, were not upgraded and were allowed to fall into disrepair. At the end of the war, political flux, communal unrest and a worrying backdrop of social disorder made most firms, whose ownership was increasingly passing into the hands of Indian speculators, loath to invest much needed capital into improving their plant. The result, as one scholar has noted, was that 'West Bengal started its journey as a constituent state of the union of India with a highly vulnerable industrial infrastructure.'[82] Partition dealt this precariously positioned manufacturing sector a body blow from which it never recovered.

The effects of partition on jute, Bengal's largest industry, are well known: Radcliffe's line placed every single one of Bengal's ninety-nine jute mills in West Bengal, but almost four-fifths of the jute-growing areas, which provided the mills with their essential raw material, went to East Bengal. The best high-yielding varieties of jute were grown in East Bengal. West Bengal grew less than 2 million bales of raw jute annually, and its quality was variable; in 1947–8, its mills needed to import almost three times that amount from the east to meet demand. As a result, the price of raw jute shot up, and this hit the manufacturing industry hard. The governments of India and Pakistan signed agreements on the supply of raw jute, but these were not observed, creating acute shortages in the supply of raw material, sending prices ever higher and eroding still further the profitability of the mills.[83] Already nervous, investors were more reluctant than before to fork out money to modernise the obsolescent mills,[84] and the

[82] A. K. Bagchi, 'Studies on the economy of West Bengal since independence', p. 2973.

[83] Under the terms of the first Inter-Dominion Agreement of May 1948, Pakistan agreed to supply India with 5 million bales of raw jute in the year from July 1948 to June 1949. In turn, India agreed to restrict its export of raw jute on the world market to 900,000 bales. However, the agreement did not work, as India failed to buy all of the jute Pakistan offered because of disputes over quality and price. In July 1949, a second agreement was hammered out, by which Pakistan undertook to export only 4 million bales of jute to India. Prices began to spiral upwards when the market calculated that this amount of jute would not be enough to feed the industry. The price of raw jute rose still higher in September 1949, when India, in the throes of a foreign exchange crisis, devalued its currency by 44 per cent in order to compete more effectively in the world market. Pakistan refused to follow suit, since it calculated that devaluation would not bring immediate benefits to its exports. Overnight, the cost of raw jute for West Bengal's jute industry rose by 44 per cent. See Tyagi, 'The economic impact of partition', pp. 112–15.

[84] *Ibid.*, p. 122. On the decline of Bengal's jute industry, see D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history*; and Omkar Goswami, *Industry, trade and peasant society. The jute economy of eastern India, 1900–1947*, Delhi, 1991.

Table 5.7. *Workers employed in factories in West Bengal, 1948*

Industry	West Bengal
Textiles	345,010
Engineering (total), of which	107,495
Electrical engineering	6,081
Ship-building and related engineering	19,049
Railway workshops	12,193
General engineering	47,315
Minerals and metals (total), of which	29,940
Iron and steel	25,039
Food, drink and tobacco	27,091
Chemical, dyes etc. (total), of which	24,626
Chemicals	7,674
Dyeing and bleaching	—
Paper and printing (total), of which	18,859
Paper mills	9,586
Wood, stone and glass	17,161
Skins and hides, of which	8,676
Leather and shoes	8,041
Miscellaneous	16,056
TOTAL	**601,772**

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.

Source: Bengal Chamber of Commerce, *West Bengal. An analytical survey*, Calcutta, 1971, p. 11.

industry grew increasingly uncompetitive in world markets. East Bengal in Pakistan soon set up mills of its own, stocked with brand-new machinery, and they processed the jute grown locally in the east. Competition from the east, and later from synthetic fibres, eventually proved too powerful for West Bengal's core business effectively to challenge. In the long run, these problems sent the jute industry, the heart and centre of Bengal's manufacturing sector, into irreversible decline.

Less well known, but no less destructive, was partition's impact on Bengal's paper industry, which employed about 10,000 people (see table 5.7). Before partition, Bengal's paper mills had been both innovative and dynamic. By using a new material – bamboo – and simple technologies, the mills had come to produce about half of India's total output of paper. But the mills in western Bengal depended on eastern Bengal to supply the bamboo from which the paper was made. After partition, Pakistan slapped an export duty on bamboo and West Bengal's paper mills had to buy their raw materials from suppliers in

central and southern India at significantly higher prices than they had been used to paying.[85] Once ideally situated downstream from their supplies of raw material, Bengal's paper mills lost their competitive advantage and also spiralled into decline.[86] This gloomy pattern was repeated in many smaller industries which had depended on raw materials from the east. Calcutta's leather industry, for instance, also stalled when the supply of good-quality hides from the east abruptly stopped.[87] This affected the 250 or so Chinese 'chrome' tanneries in the city, which at one time had employed over 8,000 people. By 1949, the output of Calcutta's tanneries had fallen by three-quarters and its production of shoes and leather goods had halved.[88] Industries and manufacturing units which had supplied markets in eastern Bengal, now situated across closed borders in Pakistan, were also badly affected. Units producing silk lost their best markets in Pakistan and, after partition, were forced to cut back output and later to close down altogether.[89] Small factories and workshops in the west, which had provided the bazaars of eastern Bengal with many of their everyday consumer goods, whether cloth, paper, bicycles, matches, shoes or medicines, were broken by losing their traditional markets.

Tea was another sector of Bengal's economy that was severely disrupted by partition, when the network of railways which had carried tea to the ports was divided between east and west. Assam tea could no longer be exported from Chittagong, which was now in East Bengal, but had to make the longer and more expensive journey down to the port of Calcutta. Since India had no railway line connecting Assam to Calcutta, the tea chests had to be freighted on railways which belonged to Pakistan. This meant that the tea industry was at the mercy of freight rates set by another country, a problem compounded by congestion at the port of Calcutta, which simply did not have enough facilities for storing and handling the volume of tea which finally made its costly way down from Assam.[90] Nor were the north Bengal gardens better placed.

[85] The higher transport costs also made significant inroads into profits; see Tyagi, 'The economic impact of partition', p. 157.

[86] *West Bengal. An analytical study*, p. 99.

[87] The Muslim-dominated areas which went to Pakistan traditionally produced hides skinned off slaughtered animals, which consequently were of better quality than hides from 'fallen' cattle which died a natural death. In the areas which went to India, Hindu sentiment ensured that hides tended to be skinned only off 'fallen' or dead animals, which were in less assured supply and were, in any case, of palpably inferior quality.

[88] Tyagi, 'The economic impact of partition', p. 147.

[89] West Bengal's silk products were eventually priced out of the market by more efficiently produced and cheaper Japanese goods: *ibid.*, p. 127.

[90] *Ibid.*, pp. 135–56.

Radcliffe's Award had cut north Bengal off from the rest of the province and severed the railway line connecting Siliguri to Calcutta. The dislocation of the rail connections also inflicted collateral damage on the industry by interrupting the supply of coal, fertilisers and machinery upon which the tea estates in the north depended. Shortages of coal created particularly acute problems, since tea leaves had to be dried soon after they were plucked. If there was no coal, they could not be dried in time, and huge quantities of tea rotted in the *godowns* or warehouses of plantations in Assam and north Bengal. In desperation, planters resorted to cutting down trees and burning wood to dry the tea leaves. In its turn, this slash-and-burn assault on trees caused deforestation and long-term damage to the soil cover of the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri foothills or *dooars*, which in time undermined the productivity and the competitiveness of tea plantations in West Bengal.

Some of these problems were eased after the 'Assam rail link' was completed in 1950, but the damage and disruption caused by partition to Bengal's once-integrated transport system took far longer to put to rights. The new border severed the Malda and Murshidabad roads at several points, affecting Dinajpur's position as a nodal town and transport hub. South of the Padma river, the Jessore road had also been snapped into two.[91] Waterways, vital for transport in the riverine and marshy conditions of low-lying Bengal, were similarly disrupted, notably the circular and eastern canal, one of the longest in the world, which had connected Calcutta by water to its eastern Bengal and Assam hinterlands. Railway links,[92] steamer routes and arteries which had been severed had somehow to be reconnected or be given a bypass. Thousands of miles of new roads had to be built. Peasants who lived along the border, and who in the past had sold their produce at nearby rural bazaars in the east, needed new links to the towns and markets now closest to them in the west, which by definition were much further away than their traditional markets to the east had been. Just how badly the infrastructure of West Bengal's transport was affected by partition is shown by the fact that, in the first five-year plan, West Bengal had to allocate almost a quarter of its entire budget on repairing its fractured transport and communications systems.

The cutbacks and closures forced upon businesses, big and small, by partition, inevitably led to a sharp, and politically damaging, fall in

[91] S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 101.

[92] On the importance of the railways to the economy of the region, and particularly for the prices of food grains, see Mukul Mukherjee, 'Railways and their impact on Bengal's economy, 1870–1920', in Ian J. Kerr (ed.), *Railways in modern India*, New Delhi, 2001.

employment in key sectors of West Bengal's economy, at a time when unemployment was already spiralling out of control. Acute shortages of food added to these problems. That Bengal's richest and biggest fisheries went to East Bengal is well known: indeed this loss continues to be mourned to this day in West Bengal particularly during the rains when *hilsa* spawn. This delicacy, prized by the gourmand fish-eaters of West Bengal, became much harder to find (and more expensive) than in the halcyon days when *Padma nadir ilish*[93] had been in plentiful supply. But more serious by far than the dearth of *hilsa* were severe shortages in rice, the staple diet of Bengal. Even before partition, western Bengal did not grow enough rice to feed its people. The main deficit zones were the industrial regions of Calcutta, Hooghly, Howrah and the 24 Parganas. In normal years, Birbhum, Bankura and Midnapore grew more rice than they consumed, but this surplus was not sufficient to meet the demand from the hungry towns and cities of West Bengal and the 'deficit' districts. By 1947, West Bengal's overall 'rice gap' was over 6 maunds (or almost 500 pounds) per person.[94] Partition gave almost 20 million acres of rice-growing paddy fields to Pakistan,[95] so rice became even more scarce and expensive in the west than it had been in the past. These shortages were made worse when, in its anxiety to feed the voracious jute mills, the state government diverted 200,000 acres of scarce *aus* (autumn) paddy-growing rice land to the cultivation of jute.[96] Immediately after partition, shortages of rice were made more acute by bottlenecks in the movement of stocks when their transport was disrupted; and of course the 'grow more jute' policy meant growing less rice. By July 1950, West Bengal faced an annual 'food gap' of 200,000 tons[97] and came to depend on supplies from other parts of India. This gap proved intractably difficult to bridge. India did not grow enough food for its population, having lost to Pakistan crucial tracts of fertile agricultural land in the Punjab and Sind which were food-surplus areas.[98] In particular, India as a whole did not grow enough rice for the country's needs. Nor could the central exchequer, struggling with a dollar deficit, afford to import large quantities of rice from abroad to meet shortfalls in West Bengal. In the years that followed independence, West Bengal failed to improve its own rice yields significantly for many reasons: indeed, these decades have been

[93] Literally, *hilsa* from the Padma river in East Bengal.
[94] S. P. Chatterjee, *Bengal in maps*, p. 66.
[95] Vakil, *Economic consequences of divided India*, p. 15.
[96] Tyagi, 'The economic impact of partition', p. 117.
[97] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 172.
[98] The areas which went to West Pakistan produced 443,000 tons of surplus wheat: Vakil, *Economic consequences of divided India*, p. 15.

characterised as years of 'agrarian impasse' in Bengal.[99] In the 1950s, the number of mouths to feed in West Bengal increased exponentially, as a result of the influx of millions of refugees and a huge increase in the birth rate, and the state's 'food gap' continued rapidly to grow.[100] By 1959, it had risen to 950,000 tons;[101] 'hunger marches' became a common sight in the streets of Calcutta and the spectre of famine, with memories of all the horrors of the previous decade, once again seemed about to stalk the land.

West Bengal's leaders had anticipated that, in the aftermath of partition, their 'down-sized' state would need help from the centre to make good its losses and rebuild its shattered economy and infrastructure, even though they failed to gauge the devastating extent of the dislocation which it actually experienced. In the Constituent Assembly, they supported the creation of a centre with extensive powers because they believed that West Bengal needed a strong Delhi able and willing to help the state back on its feet. With support from West Bengal, Article 369 gave the centre control over precisely those vital areas of policy which could most help Bengal's economic recovery: authority to regulate trade and commerce in foodstuffs, coal, iron and steel, and to coordinate the relief and rehabilitation of refugees once it was realised that this project too would need huge resources. West Bengal's spokesmen in the Constituent Assembly had also backed the centre's claim to collect the most lucrative taxes, assuming that by this self-denying ordinance their state would in future benefit from the centre's largesse. By the late 1950s, however, it was clear – both to Congressmen in Bengal and to their critics – that their hopes had been misplaced. After partition, West Bengal's government was unable to raise sufficient resources of its own to finance the reconstruction of the state, and the centre failed to step in to fill the gap.

This was not, as many in Bengal have been wont to claim,[102] because New Delhi deliberately discriminated against West Bengal. In the years after independence and partition, the government of India faced pressing problems on a number of other fronts. While aware of West Bengal's predicament, it had other more urgent priorities. In 1947, India was critically dependent on imports to run its industries and to feed its people,

[99] The sluggish performance of Bengal's agriculture after 1947 has been attributed to the unequal distribution of landholdings and to the difficulties of the peasantry in getting access to affordable water, fertilisers and credit. See J. K. Boyce, *Agrarian impasse in Bengal. Institutional constraints to technological change*, Oxford, 1987.

[100] Between 1949 and 1964, West Bengal's per capita output of foodstuffs declined by 1.42 per cent, while its population continued to grow: *ibid.*, pp. 141–2.

[101] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 411.

[102] This case was made most effectively by Ranajit Roy in a series of well-researched newspaper articles in the *Hindusthan Standard*, republished in 1973 in *The agony of West Bengal*.

Table 5.8. *Central government expenditure from 15 August 1947 to 31 March 1948*

Item of expenditure	Lakhs of rupees
Direct demands on revenue (cost of collection)	533
Irrigation	7
Debt services	2,052
Civil administration	2,024
Currency and mint	120
Civil works	621
Pensions	189
Miscellaneous:	
Expenditure on refugees	2,200
Subsidy on imported food grains	2,252
Other expenditure	230
Grants to provinces	45
Extraordinary charges	192
Defence services (net)	9,274
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	**19,979**

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: C. N. Vakil, *Economic consequences of divided India. A study of the economy of India and Pakistan*, Bombay, 1950, p. 82.

and it was desperately short of foreign exchange. Admittedly it had resources by way of the so-called sterling balances, monies owed to Delhi by London on account of India's wartime expenditures on behalf of the Allies. But these balances could only be used to buy goods from Britain and from within the sterling area, which in its turn had been crippled by the war and could not swiftly or cheaply supply India with the goods it most urgently needed. In consequence, India suffered from acute shortages of many essential commodities, and inflation remained dangerously high. To curb the rise in prices, the central government had to cut back its own expenditure, spending such monies as it had sparingly and with great care. Rehabilitating the Punjab refugees, many of whom were drawn to Delhi itself, was an urgent and very costly task which the central government could not ignore; indeed, this was one of its top priorities. Buying equipment for the army, soon to be engaged in a war in Kashmir, in taking over Hyderabad and in pacifying the Punjab, was another irresistible call on a depleted central exchequer. Purchasing food grains abroad was also a priority, but food was needed all over India, not only in West Bengal. As table 5.8 shows, these expenditures swallowed up most of the resources at the centre's disposal. What crumbs of the cake

remained had then to be shared out among many claimants. Every province of India demanded its cut of the dividends of independence, which for a long time remained disappointingly meagre. So West Bengal had to wait its turn in a long queue of supplicants for handouts from the centre. Calcutta received no special favours from Delhi. Indeed, it could hardly have been otherwise.

Ironically, the very same rules which West Bengal's spokesmen in the Constituent Assembly had helped the centre put in place now resulted in the province being left without the wherewithal to pay for its economic reconstruction. With Bengal's support, the Assembly had taken away the province's largest sources of revenue, the taxes on income and corporations, and excise and jute duties. West Bengal had gambled that it would do better by receiving handouts from a central Finance Commission, which would give it back these revenues and more, and that gamble failed. The algorithms by which the Finance Commissions calculated each state's 'need' whittled down what West Bengal received from the centre. In 1952, the first Finance Commission linked 'need' to population, with the consequence that the states with the largest populations got the most. This algorithm worked against West Bengal with its much reduced population. Later Finance Commissions also took into account indices of 'backwardness' in determining what the states would get from the centre.[103] These criteria, with hardly an exception, also worked against West Bengal and the result, as Saroj Chakrabarty recalls, 'came as a great disappointment to Bengal's political circles'.[104] In 1936, the Niemeyer Award had given Bengal 20 per cent of the total takings in income taxes. After partition, the Deshmukh Award reduced West Bengal's share of India's income tax revenues from 20 per cent to 13.5 per cent. Far from increasing Bengal's share, the First Finance Commission reduced it to 11.25 per cent. The Second Finance Commission lowered it further still to 10 per cent, while in contrast the share of Uttar Pradesh rose to 16.5 per cent.[105] After 1947, income tax came to be the single largest source of government revenue. So the

[103] The First Finance Commission ruled that 80 per cent of the states' share would be divided among them on the basis of the size of their populations. Only 20 per cent of the proceeds was to be shared out on the basis of residence or collection: in other words, states received from the remainder sums proportionate to their contribution to the entire pool. The Second Finance Commission reduced this proportion to a mere 10 per cent. See Santhanam, *Union–state relations in India*, p. 35.

[104] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 222.

[105] Vithal and Sastry, *Fiscal federalism*, annexure XXX. See also R. Roy, *The agony of West Bengal*, p. 33.

Table 5.9. *Transfers of taxes and duties to West Bengal and Maharashtra, 1952–1969, in Rs crores*

(Figures in parentheses show percentage of total transfers)

State	First Commission	Second Commission	Third Commission	Fourth Commission	Fifth Commission
West Bengal	40.2	79.5	93.7	118.3	376.3
	(12.3)	(9.7)	(9.2)	(9.4)	(8.5)
Maharashtra	62.9	109.9	119.5	157.2	486.8
	(17.8)	(13.4)	(11.7)	(12.5)	(11.0)

Source: B. P. R. Vithal and M. L. Sastry, *Fiscal federalism in India*, New Delhi, 2001, annexure XIX.

fact that West Bengal's share of this key resource declined was a grave blow to its plans for economic recovery.[106]

Nor did West Bengal get as large a share of the excise duties as it had hoped to win. The Finance Commission denied any special advantages to more prosperous and urbanised states, whose wealthier people consumed most of the goods which were subject to excise duties in India. It decided to distribute monies raised by excise duties according to 'need'.[107] Once again, 'need' was measured by the size of population and by the criterion of 'backwardness'. So the states with the largest populations which also happened to be the most 'backward' got the biggest share of independent India's excise revenues. West Bengal, with its reduced, but highly urbanised, population, found that its share of excise duties shrank to about 7 per cent of India's total. In contrast, Uttar Pradesh's share rose to 16 per cent.[108]

The centre's new criteria for doling out monies to the provinces thus progressively chipped away at West Bengal's share of these taxes and duties, from 12.3 per cent in 1952 to 8.5 per cent in 1969 (see table 5.9). To make matters worse, immediately after partition, the government of India slashed West Bengal's share of the jute export duty from almost two-thirds to a fifth, on the grounds that most of the jute-growing areas were now not in West Bengal but in East Pakistan. In 1952, the Finance Commission abolished altogether the jute-producing states' share of the jute export duty, the only alleviation being that the central government

[106] In 1954, for instance, West Bengal paid Rs 40 crores in income tax, but the state got only Rs 6.5 crores of this back from the centre: S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 247.
[107] Vithal and Sastry, *Fiscal federalism*, p. 98. [108] *Ibid.*, annexure XXX.

Table 5.10. *Central budgetary transfers to states by type and plan period*

(in Rs crores; percentages in parentheses)

Plan periods	Statutory transfers	Plan transfers	Discretionary transfers	Total
First Five-Year Plan (1951–6)	447 (31.2)	880 (61.5)	104 (7.3)	1,431
Second Five-Year Plan (1956–61)	876 (32.0)	1058 (38.7)	799 (29.3)	2,733
Third Five-Year Plan (1961–6)	1542 (27.4)	2515 (44.7)	1566 (27.9)	5,623

Source: I. S. Gulati and K. K. George, 'Inter-state redistribution through the budget', in I. S. Gulati (ed.), *Centre–state budgetary transfers*, Delhi, 1987.

continued to give West Bengal some 'compensation' in lieu of the duty for ten years.[109] As a result of these various decisions, by 1955 West Bengal faced an annual revenue deficit of about Rs 13 crores.[110]

Admittedly, the 'statutory transfers', as the Finance Commission's disbursements to the states came to be known, amounted to only about a third of the total sums Delhi gave to the provinces. In the first two decades after partition, the Planning Commission distributed almost twice as much money to the states for their development as the Finance Commission doled out (see table 5.10). But if West Bengal's leaders hoped that the Planning Commission would redress the 'wrongs' the state had suffered at the hands of the Finance Commission, they were sadly mistaken. West Bengal received from the commission among the smallest plan outlays per capita of any state.[111] It did slightly better out of discretionary transfers, which were, as their description suggests, monies disbursed by the centre at will, though even under this heading, West Bengal actually received far less than either the Punjab or Haryana. In any event, much of what Bengal received in discretionary transfers was by way of loans rather than outright grants.[112] As a result, by 1956 West Bengal owed Rs 140 crores to the central government.[113] Nor did West Bengal

[109] *Ibid.*, p. 151. [110] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 247.

[111] Between 1956 and 1977, West Bengal received a meagre Rs 186 per capita from the centre in plan transfers, while Orissa received Rs 308, the Punjab Rs 278 and Assam Rs 400. Only Maharashtra got less money per capita than Bengal: I. S. Gulati and K. K. George, 'Inter-state redistribution through the budget', in I. S. Gulati (ed.), *Centre–state budgetary transfers*, Delhi, 1987, p. 276.

[112] K. K. George, 'Discretionary budgetary transfers. A review', in Gulati, *Centre–state budgetary transfers*, pp. 247–64.

[113] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 272.

do better out of central aid to underwrite or 'guarantee' its struggling industries. Between 1947 and 1967, West Bengal received progressively less financial assistance from government-sponsored bodies, and considerably less than the size of its industries warranted. Between 1947 and 1967, Bengal's share of industrial aid was less than half the assistance given by the centre to Maharashtra, and just over a third of the amounts received by the old 'Bombay' Presidency, that is Maharashtra and Gujarat taken together. Even Tamil Nadu's industries, which produced less than half as much as West Bengal's, got more financial help from the centre than did Bengal.[114]

But the most disappointing blow to Bengal's hopes came from Delhi's administration of subjects under Article 369 – in other words, foodstuffs, coal, iron and steel, and, above all, refugees. If there was one single issue which proved that the central government cared little, and was prepared to do less, about West Bengal's particular problems, it was the centre's policy towards the refugees from the east. Long after the exodus in Bengal of the Hindus from east to west had begun, Nehru's government continued stubbornly to keep its eyes shut to what was happening. Delhi accepted that refugees from western Pakistan, that is from the Punjab and Sind, would have permanently to be rehabilitated and it was ready to use 'evacuee' property abandoned by Muslims for this purpose. But it insisted that the exodus of refugees from the east into West Bengal could and should be halted, even reversed, provided government in Dacca deployed 'psychological measures' to restore confidence among the emigrating Hindu minorities.[115] The Inter-Dominion Agreement of April 1948 was intended to stem the flow of this human tide into Bengal.[116] In the meantime, central government regarded any relief to refugees from East Bengal as stop-gap measures. Permanent rehabilitation, in its view, was unnecessary and positively to be discouraged. So Delhi set its face against any redistribution of the property of Muslim evacuees from Bengal to incoming Hindu refugees. Grappling with what he regarded as more urgent concerns, on the Bengal refugee question Nehru buried his head in the sand and hoped the problem would go away.[117] Far from the centre rushing in help, West Bengal was left to cope as best it could with the staggering human consequences of a partition

[114] *West Bengal. An analytical study*, p. 147.

[115] Jawaharlal Nehru to Dr B. C. Roy, 2 December 1949, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 144.

[116] For more on the first Inter-Dominion Agreement, see ch. 3, n. 68.

[117] Nehru's first reference to the Bengal refugees in his fortnightly letters to chief ministers was only in April 1948; his comment was extremely revealing: 'We are naturally as much committed to help[ing] these refugees as any from Western Pakistan. Nevertheless it is

which the Congress high command had conspired with its satraps in Bengal to engineer.

Nehru seemed equally unwilling to accept that Bengal had an acute and growing shortage of food. In the summer of 1952, when Dr Roy begged for help and the opposition parties launched their first 'food movement', Nehru's reply was both dismissive and patronising:

> I am afraid I just do not understand all this trouble about food in Calcutta. I do not see how the Centre can possibly pay for further subsidies . . . The officers of your Food Department do not appear to be too bright. So far as the Centre is concerned we have fulfilled every commitment we made . . . It is obvious that all this trouble in Calcutta has little to do with food and is purely political.[118]

Delhi also refused to use its powers under Article 369 to rescue West Bengal's embattled industries. On the contrary, in 1956, T. T. Krishnamachari, central minister for commerce, industry, iron and steel, equalised the price of iron and steel at all railheads and granted subsidies which were linked to the costs of transporting coal. In consequence, industrial centres located far away from the sources of these materials did well at the expense of the Bengal–Bihar region where these minerals were mined. By establishing an even playing field in one of the few areas of enterprise – iron and steel – where West Bengal still enjoyed a competitive advantage, the centre further undermined the ability of West Bengal's industries, which had suffered so many other blows, to compete.[119]

Nor did the centre's policies on trade, tariffs and customs duties help West Bengal. Delhi used tariffs and quota restrictions to protect industries which catered to India's domestic markets. But it did little to help exporters. On the contrary, for several years after independence, it imposed an export tax on the jute industry. As Bagchi points out, the result was that 'import-substituting industries sucked capital away from the . . . export-oriented industries', the cornerstone of West Bengal's industrial economy.[120] The allocation of imported raw materials was another crucial matter where the centre's policy of equating need with numbers harmed West Bengal. The consequences of this policy were particularly damaging for West Bengal's engineering industry.

dangerous to encourage this exodus as this may lead to disastrous consequences' (Parthasarathi, *Nehru. Letters to chief ministers*, p. 100). He stressed that 'we are very anxious that Hindus should not leave east Bengal. If they do so in very large numbers they will suffer greatly and we might be wholly unable to make any arrangements for them' (*ibid.*, p. 108).

118 S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 206.

119 *West Bengal. An analytical study*, p. 150.

120 A. K. Bagchi, 'Studies on the economy of West Bengal since independence', p. 2976.

Engineering, especially in the large railway wagon workshops and the numerous small-scale units which provided the wagon-masters with parts and services, was one of the few remaining spots of dynamism in the otherwise declining industrial economy of West Bengal after partition. But building wagons for India's railways depended critically on access to expensive imported materials.[121] The government of India decided to allocate these materials to states on the basis of their population rather than on the proven capacity of a state's industries to use these imports to best effect. Thus Gujarat, whose industries used only 3,000 tons of copper in 1962–3, was allotted 2,189 tons of imported copper, whereas West Bengal, despite having an 'assessed requirement' of 19,900 tons, was allotted only 1,835 tons.[122] This bizarre policy of being even-handed in allocating imported raw materials was applied across the board, and forced West Bengal's engineering workshops to operate at levels well below their installed capacity. Bengal protested, but to no avail.[123] Eventually, in 1966, this ill-considered policy brought to its knees yet another industry in Bengal which in 1947 still seemed to have reasonable prospects, thereby accelerating West Bengal's slide into a severe and lasting industrial recession which undermined the well-being of the polity as a whole.

In much the same way, the centre failed to take swift and efficient steps to help rebuild West Bengal's shattered economic infrastructure. In 1971, almost a quarter of a century after partition, the road and rail bridge over the Ganges which was intended to restore the severed transport links between north and south Bengal had still not been completed, its unfinished spans mocking those who continued to cross the river by ferry. About a quarter of the state was still more than ten miles away from the nearest railhead. Plans to build feeder roads to link the many isolated villages to a disrupted system of trunk and district roads and markets remained mainly on the drawing board.[124] For over two decades after independence, Delhi found it convenient to turn a blind eye to the appalling problems of the once-fabled capital city of the British Indian empire. After partition, Calcutta's population swelled exponentially, far beyond the already overburdened capacity of its infrastructure. By 1961, the grossly overcrowded metropolis had almost 75,000 people per square mile. It did not have enough water or electricity for its teeming millions.

[121] Ajitava Raychaudhuri and Biswajit Chatterjee, 'Pattern of industrial growth in West Bengal during last two decades. Some policy suggestions', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 November 1998, pp. 3061–3.

[122] *West Bengal. An analytical study*, p. 105.

[123] Even the Lok Sabha Estimates Committee's 105th report remarked on the folly of distributing resources in this way, but the report was ignored: *ibid.*, p. 151.

[124] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Its sewage system, designed in 1896 to take away the waste of 600,000 people, half a century later was silted and blocked with the detritus of a population of many millions. Stinking garbage lay uncollected for days and faeces festered in open drains, with a dispirited and corrupt corporation totally failing to cope.[125] By the late 1960s, the city's 270 miles of surfaced roads, once the envy of urban India, were pockmarked with potholes and frequently water-logged, and traffic was usually at a standstill, choked by dangerously overcrowded buses and trams, by endless lines of cycles, rickshaws and the handcarts pushed by Calcutta's human beasts of burden. But, despite urgent appeals to Delhi by West Bengal's leaders and a damning indictment of this sad saga of neglect by experts from the World Bank,[126] it was not until the Emergency of 1971 that any central money was earmarked to improve Calcutta's collapsing infrastructure. The city's future as an entrepot of trade and a leading port depended on the Hooghly remaining capable of being navigated by big ships. But decades of silt, whether flowing downstream or being pushed upstream by a tidal estuary, had throttled the port, and money for the huge expenditure needed to drain the river was not available. By the late 1960s, the Hooghly had silted up to such an extent that ships with a draft of over 26 feet could no longer enter the port. By 1971, India's premier port had declined to a lowly sixth place. Only the new ports of Kandla in Gujarat and of Paradip on the coast of Orissa handled a smaller tonnage than Calcutta, once India's busiest port, which for centuries had dominated the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean.[127]

These brutal consequences of partition on the economy of West Bengal forced its leaders to realise the huge gulf between their optimistic prognostications and the harsh realities of independent India. The alarm bells had begun to ring as early as 1949 when the Congress candidate in South Calcutta lost the bye-election, a sign that the electorate had begun to turn against the Congress. But far from finding time to address Bengal's problems, Nehru demanded that Dr Roy's government resign. Outraged at Nehru's reaction, Roy's finance minister, Nalini Sarkar, pointed out that West Bengal's difficulties had 'been exaggerated by acts of omission and commission in New Delhi' and argued that Bengalis were justified in feeling '*that the Congress High Command and New Delhi do not fully appreciate their problems. Many of our acute problems do not appear to have received due attention from the Central authorities.*'[128]

[125] *Ibid.*, p. 69. [126] *Economic Weekly*, 19 November 1960.
[127] *West Bengal. An analytical study*, p. 56.
[128] Sarkar argued that it was 'wrong to maintain the idea that the prejudice created against the Congress in this province was due mainly to the West Bengal Ministry . . . During the

For the time being, Roy's ministry survived the threats from Delhi and from its own constituents and managed to hang on to office. But the Bengal Congress could not ignore Delhi's unsympathetic conclusion that the problems of Bengal were of its own making and that it would have to deal with them on its own. Roy got the message, but when writing to Nehru later that year he did not try to hide his anger and disappointment at what Bengal saw as a gross betrayal by the centre. Criticising Delhi for its 'insignificant' expenditure on Bengali refugees, he told Nehru:

> You are under the impression that your Government gave us 'a large grant' for the purpose of 'relief' and rehabilitation. Do you realise that the total grant received for this purpose from your Government in the two years 1948–49 and 1949–50 is a little over three crores, the rest about five crores was given in the form of a loan? Do you realise that this sum is insignificant compared to what has been spent for refugees from West Pakistan? ... for 16 lakh people ... it works out at about Rs 20/- per capita spread over two years. Will you call it magnificent [*sic*]?

In a passage remarkable for its sharpness, coming as it did from a normally genial and calm physician, Roy savaged the fiscal discrimination of the centre against West Bengal:

> Allow me to repeat what I have said more than once, that when Bengal was partitioned, West Bengal started with a deficit balance of 2.5 crores, still unpaid. We were badly treated by the Centre which took away part of our share of Income-Tax and Jute Tax allotments and distributed the income-tax moiety to other provinces and kept the Jute-tax share for themselves. *The fact remains that without previous intimation to us we were informed in March 1948 that our share of the income tax receipts ha[d] been reduced from 20 per cent to 12 per cent* or in other words our share which was 6.5 crores annually was reduced to 3.5 crores ... See how iniquitous this new arrangement proves to be: Bombay with a population of 21 millions received an enhanced share from 20 to 21 per cent whereas West Bengal with the same population or perhaps a little more got her share reduced from 20 per cent to 12 per cent ... While we were struggling with depleted finances, we had to provide new border pickets – a huge extra burden on our province. We had to provide border roads for which we were not prepared and which were not necessary for civil administration. We had to protect the borders and the points where smuggled and contraband goods pass across. These two are recent bye-election, the West Bengal industry came in for abuse, no doubt, but the brunt of the abuse was, and still is, being hurled mainly at the Congress as a whole and the Central Government in particular ... West Bengal has passed through terrible suffering. The war, the famine, the communal killing and the partition all came in quick succession. She is now a border province – with her economic system and family ties cut asunder. No wonder that she is in a tense psychological state.' He went on to criticise the centre's policies of taxation, and its handling of food and cloth shortages in Bengal which made the state's problems worse. See Nalini Ranjan Sarkar to Dr Rajendra Prasad, 26 June 1949, Rajendra Prasad Papers, File 1-B/49 (emphasis added).

definitely in the interests of India as a whole and yet *in spite of repeated requests we have no financial support from the centre on these matters.*

Roy wrote that, while he 'fully realise[d] the difficulties' which the centre faced, Nehru was 'wrong when [he said] that the difficulties of the Centre [were] greater than those of the provinces'. He concluded by giving Nehru 'a timely and gentle warning that you may not blame us for troubles that you may very well avoid'.[129]

Roy's letter is a measure not only of his frustration but of how little influence his ministry had on policy at the centre in matters which crucially affected the well-being of West Bengal. The state government was not consulted when the centre decided to cut its share of income tax. No one was interested in Bengal's views when the centre decided to strip the state of revenue from the jute tax. Its pleas for aid from the centre to help its refugees and to defend its new borders were ignored. Nehru refused to engage with Roy on any of these questions. Instead, he forwarded the complaints from Bengal to the party's 'iron man' and enforcer, Vallabhbhai Patel. Adding insult to injury, Patel harshly rebuked Roy for failing to be 'deferential as is appropriate to the dignity of the high office' and for engaging in the 'distasteful' game of 'fault finding'.[130] The boss of a proud province which had once seen itself as leading and educating the rest of India had been summoned, like some recalcitrant schoolboy, to the headmaster's study to be given six of the best.

After these humiliating exchanges, Roy had no choice but to recognise the harsh fact that he and his fellow Congressmen in Bengal had grossly overestimated their potential standing and influence in Delhi. They now realised that the centre would not bail Bengal out of its difficulties. To his credit, Roy reacted by trying to devise a different strategy to limit the damage. His government no longer passively and impotently waited for Delhi to come to its rescue. Instead, it took a more proactive line, drawing up schemes for the reconstruction of the state and attempting to raise the money to finance them. It did so in the hope that Delhi might be persuaded at the very least to give its blessing to these schemes and perhaps help meet any shortfall in the resources needed to fund them. In 1951, Roy inaugurated the Mayurkashi project in Birbhum to improve irrigation and drainage and generate electricity, all sorely needed in West Bengal. In 1953, after a poor showing at the polls and after he narrowly avoided losing his own seat, Roy turned his attention to schemes to relieve middle-class unemployment, to build houses and to train teachers. He

[129] Dr B. C. Roy to Jawaharlal Nehru, 1 December 1949, in S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 140–2 (emphasis added).
[130] *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.

drew up plans to give Calcutta more space by reclaiming the marshy land around it. Other ideas included a bridge and barrage across the Ganges at Farakka in order to flush the Hooghly and also to improve the links between north and south in West Bengal. Roy also pressed for a second port to be constructed at Haldia and wanted to build an oil refinery there.[131] Convinced that 'the development of Durgapur [was] the only means by which [the] state [could] recover from its difficult position, both in regard to finance and employment',[132] he asked Delhi to allow him to set up a coke oven and pig iron and power plants there to give Bengal's industrial capacity a boost and to provide employment, all to be paid for by the state with private capital, not by handouts from Delhi.

But Bengal still needed the centre's backing for these ambitious projects, both because it did not have enough money of its own to pay for them and because the rules of the constitution required Bengal to get the go-ahead from the centre for such initiatives. All too frequently, as Roy now discovered, the centre's sanction for these important plans was delayed and eventually denied. When help was given, it was usually too little and too late. Despite all his badgering, Roy found 'neither the Planning Commission nor the Production Ministry helpful' with his plans for Durgapur, despite the fact that West Bengal had not asked Delhi for money. In 1954, the centre refused to grant a licence to the Birla brothers privately to set up ancillary pig iron and steel plants at Durgapur.[133] In that same year, Roy found that the 'Central Government had failed to pay Rs 15.5 crores' to West Bengal towards the state's plan.[134] In February 1955, the centre still had not sanctioned the Durgapur project, as the committee concerned had 'raised various puerile objections' and created 'as much obstruction as possible'.[135] For a very long time, there was no progress at all on the Ganges barrage project. From 1952 onwards, West Bengal's members of Parliament in Delhi lobbied ceaselessly for the centre to sanction this creative initiative, only to be told it was a matter of low priority.[136] In 1960, the Ganges barrage at Farakka had still not been approved, although for years Roy had 'been crying [himself] hoarse over this Project':

> I placed it at the forefront in 1954–55 when the Second Five Year Plan was in the offing. Mr Nanda, who was then in charge of that Department, definitely assured

[131] *Ibid.*, p. 205. [132] *Ibid.* [133] *Ibid.*, p. 258. [134] *Ibid.*, p. 250. [135] *Ibid.*, p. 273.

[136] The debate over the project reveals how little the centre concerned itself with the fate of Calcutta. Asked in 1954 by a West Bengal MP why the 'Ganga barrage [was] not being taken up', the deputy prime minister curtly replied that 'there is no use of [*sic*] raising this alarm that the Calcutta Port will be threatened if something is not done. This alarm has been there for many years' (cited in Ben Crow, *Sharing the Ganges. The politics and technology of river development*, Dhaka, 1997, p. 57).

me before all others of that Planning Commission that the matter would be taken up by the Central Government and therefore we have not placed it in our Plan, but nothing has happened. Commissions have come and Commissions have gone: enquiries have been made several times, perhaps 'ad nauseam'. Now I understand that the Planning Commission is not satisfied with the results of various enquiries that have been made in the past and they want to have another enquiry . . . Need we wait for that, while our own State is about to face a calamity? . . . I can only tell you that this Scheme is essential not merely for the economy of the State itself but also for the safety of the port of Calcutta which handles a very large quantity of goods for export and import . . . It will save the city of Calcutta from extra salinity . . . and help us have a balanced distribution of water in the Delta.

In reply, Nehru, while making mildly sympathetic noises, told Roy that the project could be publicly sanctioned only after the issue between India and Pakistan over the Indus waters had been resolved.[137] In January 1961, thirteen years after the project was first mooted, the National Development Council finally allowed the Ganges barrage to take its place in the Third Five-Year Plan. But the project immediately ran into trouble. Showing just how little attention to detail Delhi had given to these proposals despite the many years of delay and supposedly close investigation, no one in Lutyens's South Block had thought it necessary to inform Pakistan about a plan which would inevitably divert some of its river waters into the Hooghly.[138] Work on the project finally began only in 1964, by which time Roy's ashes had long ago been washed away in the sluggish waters of the river he had so wanted to improve. By the time the barrage was completed in 1975, twenty-eight years after partition, both Nehru and Roy were dead and gone, and the barrage had been built too late to reverse the decay of Calcutta's port, caused by an irreparable silting-up of the river.

The keystone of Bengal's policy in the Constituent Assembly had been the assumption of its delegates that partitioned West Bengal would benefit from a 'special relationship' with the centre. Events proved this assumption to have been deeply misconceived. Even Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, close friend of many of the most powerful members of the Congress high command, could not win his state any favours. Calcutta never recovered the say it had once possessed in all-India affairs. The harsh truth is that Bengal's influence at the centre declined even more rapidly after independence than in the long years which had led up to it. And the bitter irony is that the partition the leaders of Bengal had demanded was a critically important factor in that decline. Partition enabled Hindu

[137] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 447.
[138] For a full history of the controversial project, see Crow, *Sharing the Ganges*.

leaders to capture power in their truncated province, but it reduced Bengal's weight at the centre. In the Lok Sabha West Bengal, with its representation reduced to a third of its previous size, had only about 40 members in the lower house of 500 which ruled independent India. Once an impressively large body with thirty-two District Congress Committees, and the right to send 544 delegates to the All-India Congress Committee, the Bengal Congress had become an unseeded player excluded from the party's centre court at Delhi.[139] This is not to suggest that the correlation between numbers and influence in independent India was either direct or simple. Getting the most out of Delhi was a complex business for the states, and influence was not always measured by the number of members of Parliament or delegates to the party a particular state or lobby could command. But Bengal's much reduced numbers did eventually translate into a smaller share of resources, even when it came down to such trivial questions as to how many metal sheets a particular province was entitled to import. The conclusion is unavoidable: in Delhi after independence, policies were devised and implemented which palpably failed to suit West Bengal's interests.

Eventually, months before he died, Roy recognised that Bengal's strategy of looking for support from the centre had failed spectacularly. In the last year of his life, he tried to challenge Delhi's rules and to map a way forward for a more self-reliant state. In March 1961, giving evidence before the Taxation Enquiry Commission, Roy argued that after partition Bengal had come to depend even more on its industrial sector, and in consequence that the basis on which revenues were shared out by the centre was no longer fair to the state, since Delhi, not Calcutta, had the power to tax the few sources of wealth which Bengal still had in abundance.[140] In 1961, Roy attacked the Finance Commission's fundamental tenet that numbers influenced need, and condemned the 'defective reasoning' which lay behind it that the 'needs of various states were directly dependent on their population'.[141] This assumption, Roy argued, was unfair to states such as Bengal which had populations densely concentrated within a relatively small territory. Even more radically, in June 1961, just months before his death, Roy made a bold bid to have coal transferred from the centre to the states' list of subjects, publicly declaring

[139] The revised constitution of the Indian National Congress, adopted at its Jaipur session in 1948, ruled that every province would be entitled to return delegates 'in the proportion of one for every lakh of the population'. One-eighth of their numbers would represent the province on the AICC: Zaidi and Zaidi, *Encyclopaedia of the Indian National Congress*, vol. XIII, pp. 411–12. West Bengal, with a population of thirty-odd million would, by this formula, get no more than forty members on the AICC.

[140] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 247. [141] *Ibid.*, p. 487.

that coal 'was the State's property'. Bengal's would-be David at last confronted Goliath in New Delhi to demand an 'early meeting of the Chief Ministers of the various Coal-bearing states' to discuss the 'inherent inequity and anomaly' of the Coal Mines Act of 1961.[142] Not surprisingly, Roy's slingshot failed to fell his adversary or to make the centre change its mind. But it was the first sign of the new strategy by which West Bengal sought to recapture a measure of fiscal autonomy and some control over its own resources. The reference to other 'coal-bearing states' was particularly significant. Belatedly, Roy had come to realise that West Bengal needed allies in other parts of India. To make its voice heard by an indifferent and overweening centre, Bengal needed to forge alliances with other states which shared some of its interests and faced similar problems. From being a loyal poodle of the centre, in the vain hope that this would bring it special concessions, West Bengal now began to recognise the powerful arguments for states' rights against the centre. But by now it was too late for West Bengal to recover the ground it had lost. It was also too late for the Bengal Congress which Dr Roy had led. Bengal's fabled 'special relationship' with the centre, always more illusory than real, proved to be a poisoned chalice. In 1967, when the Congress in West Bengal was finally cast into the political wilderness, this was as much a consequence of the conspicuous failures of Bengal's provincial government as rejection of the Congress centre which had comprehensively let the state down.

[142] *Ibid.*, pp. 498–502.

6 The revenge of the periphery: the rise of the opposition in West Bengal

Partition, as intended, gave West Bengal a Congress ministry. But while the factions which took office continued single-mindedly to pursue their own self-interest, the political world around them was rapidly changing. On both sides of the house in West Bengal, there were winners and losers in the turbulent aftermath of partition.

During these two decades, the Communist Party of India and its offshoot, the Communist Party (Marxist), made large gains in West Bengal at the Congress's expense. This was an outcome which no one could have predicted in 1947. However much intellectuals on the left might claim that class consciousness had grown, and was continuing to grow among the workers, the fact was that in the neighbourhoods and on the shopfloors where the labouring poor lived and worked, Hindu–Muslim conflict in the 1940s had shattered many of the solidarities that the Communists had succeeded in building. Nor was smouldering communal discord after partition a propitious climate for parties committed to radical secularism. An observer of the political scene in 1947 might, with good cause, have expected the Hindu Mahasabha to do best out of partition; and yet, for reasons that need to be explored, the Mahasabha in West Bengal collapsed, while the Communists went from strength to strength.

Partition and its consequences are the key to these surprising developments. As this chapter will suggest, the parties on the left succeeded in forging alliances with significant new constituencies which partition created and which the Congress managed comprehensively to alienate – the Hindu refugees who entered the state in growing numbers and embattled Muslims in their ghettos – groups which, by the late 1960s, together counted for two in every five persons in West Bengal. The parties on the left, not the Mahasabha, also succeeded in exploiting the growing disillusionment of the Bengali-speaking urban middle classes with the Congress party in Bengal and at the centre. The conclusion that emerges is that the Communist takeover in West Bengal owed less to working-class

and peasant militancy, and more to their pragmatic and flexible support for interest groups not known for their appetite for Marxism, and for causes which did not conform to any textbook version of the creed.

The decline and fall of the Hindu Mahasabha

The party which most confidently expected to benefit from partition was the Hindu Mahasabha. Its provincial branch had been a key element in the coalition of Bengal's Hindus that had demanded the partition of the province. Indeed, until squabbling over Bengal's borders in the summer of 1947 shattered that alliance, the Bengal Mahasabha might reasonably have anticipated receiving an invitation to be a partner in the new ministry which governed West Bengal. Instead, it was relegated to the opposition benches. Yet the Mahasabha was still a force on the Bengali political scene. Its charismatic leader, Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, was invited to join Nehru's cabinet in Delhi, and the prospects of the Mahasabha gaining ground in the truncated province of Bengal remained good. Radcliffe's decisions ignored the Mahasabha's more extravagant claims before the Boundary Commission, but his Award gave West Bengal what the party wanted, an overwhelmingly Hindu population. The Hindu majority of the province was soon increased by refugees from the east, fleeing from the oppression and fear of Muslim dominance; and many of these refugees came from parts of eastern Bengal where the Mahasabha, with its communal bias, had been politically influential. Yet one of the striking paradoxes of partition was that it virtually annihilated the Mahasabha as a political force in the state which it had helped to create. In West Bengal after partition, the Hindu Mahasabha spectacularly failed to make any headway and even lost its uncertain place in the second division of the political league.

A part of the explanation lies in the failure of the Mahasabha to find a distinctive path for itself after partition, not only in Bengal but also on the all-India stage. Now that India had a strong centre, which was dominated by Hindus, the leaders as well as the supporters of the Mahasabha were unsure about what their role should be. In particular, they were uncertain how to react to the Congress at the centre, which had taken charge of independent India. Some of the Mahasabha leaders, Dr Mookerjee prominent among them, thought they would do best by joining the national government as partners of the Congress. Others considered that a better strategy would be to continue to oppose the Congress and its 'appeasement' of Muslims. Before the issue could be settled, on 30 January 1948 a Mahasabha foot-soldier shot Gandhi dead for demanding, as the assassin later confessed, that India treat Pakistan fairly in the

division of the assets of British India. Gandhi's assassination brought into the open deep fissures and cracks within the Hindu Mahasabha. As public opinion turned violently against the Mahasabha in the backlash which followed Gandhi's death, the party was forced on to its back foot. When the cabinet ordered Mookerjee to suspend all political activity by the Mahasabha, he had no choice but to comply.[1] Gandhi's death and its aftermath profoundly undermined the Mahasabha's organisation, both in West Bengal and throughout India. The Mahatma's killing at the hands of a Hindu militant spawned from the Mahasabha's own rank and file sparked off a wave of revulsion against the party, and was the single most important event blunting the edge of Hindu militancy in independent India. After '*Tees* January' (as the anniversary of Gandhi's death came to be known), Mahasabha leaders and their cadres all over India had no choice but to lie low and wait for a more propitious climate in which to propagate their communal message.

In West Bengal, Gandhi's death led to a particularly devastating fall-out for the Mahasabha. It already had serious problems in the new state. In a mirror image of what happened to the Muslim League (whose chief constituents in India had been the Muslim minorities of the north, not the majorities of the Punjab and Bengal), the Mahasabha's main strongholds before partition had been among the Hindu minorities of eastern Bengal. As Hindus in the east had grown increasingly insecure in the communally charged atmosphere of the 1940s, especially after the ugly riots in Dacca in 1941, the Mahasabha had gained support among the embattled minority community.[2] Its campaigns to win over lower Hindu castes and tribal groups beyond the Hindu pale by organising shuddhi (ritual purification) and sangathan (consolidation) ceremonies[3] had their focus in eastern Bengal; significantly, the Mahasabha's most energetic district branch

[1] This decision was confirmed two weeks after Gandhi's death. On 14 February 1948, the Working Committee of the Hindu Mahasabha met in New Delhi and decided that 'the tragic death of Mahatma Gandhi [had] made imperative an early decision on the question [of the reorientation of Mahasabha policy]'. It resolved to 'suspend its political work and to concentrate on real sangathan work, the relief and rehabilitation of refugees and the solution of our diverse social, cultural and religious problems for the creation of a powerful and well organised Hindu society in India': resolutions passed at the meeting of the Working Committee at New Delhi, 14 February 1948, All-India Hindu Mahasabha Papers (henceforth AIHM Papers), File No. C-155/1947.

[2] For example, the secretary of the Barisal Jela Hindu Mahasabha reported a revival of interest in the Mahasabha: 'In 1939, we formed a Hindu Yuba Sangha [a Hindu Youth League] under the auspices of the Hindu Mahasava. For the last two years, it gradually drifted into a languishing condition. Now, some college students have revived it under the name of the Barisal District Hindu Student Federation . . . [It] works with the ideals of the Hindu Mahasava': SPM Papers, II–IV, File No. 57/1942–43.

[3] J. Chatterji, *Bengal divided*, pp. 191–203.

was at Barisal in the east,[4] where the Mahasabha had won four seats in the local municipality. In Sirajganj, Pabna, Chandpur, Tippera, Noakhali, Mymensingh, Brahmanbaria, Narayanganj, Dacca, Rajshahi and Khulna, all situated in eastern Bengal,[5] the party had active district branches. By contrast, in the predominantly Hindu tracts of West Bengal, the only Mahasabha branch outside Calcutta which had any semblance of effectiveness was in the Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad.[6]

So the first consequence of partition (which should, with benefit of hindsight, have been anticipated) was that it cut the Mahasabha off from the very constituencies and districts where previously it had a substantial presence. Its local organisations, left stranded in East Pakistan by partition, quickly fell into disarray. By mid-1948, within a year of independence, the Mahasabha had no option but to close them all down,[7] their members having mostly joined the stream of Hindu refugees from the east who made their way into West Bengal. Erstwhile stalwarts of the Mahasabha in the east headed mainly for Calcutta (just as the Congress leaders from the east who fled to the west in 1947 had done). They did so in the expectation that they would be welcomed by the Mahasabha rump in West Bengal and would have a role in its politics.

In a pattern not dissimilar to what happened within the Bengal Congress, the expectations of the East Bengal outsiders caused discord within the Mahasabha in the west, exacerbating the party's troubles. In July 1949, the secretaries of some district and ward Hindu Sabhas in West Bengal petitioned Ashutosh Lahiry, now in Delhi, to bar 'East Pakistan

[4] SPM Papers, II–IV, File No. 90/1944–45.

[5] The provincial elections in 1946 reflected this pattern of support for the Mahasabha. It did better in the East Bengal constituencies, but was wiped off the board by the Congress in the western districts. For example, in the Burdwan Central constituency, where in 1936 the Mahasabha had won the seat, in 1946 its candidate managed to get only 334 votes, whereas its Congress rival received 76,000. In Calcutta's six constituencies, the Mahasabha received a derisory 234 votes, a total rout. In eastern Bengal, the Mahasabha did not win a seat, but many more people voted for it, 13,971 and 5,120 in the two constituencies of Mymensingh, 9,743 in Faridpur, 8,667 in Jessore, 3,060 in Noakhali and 2,141 in Khulna. In Barisal, it came close to winning the Scheduled Caste seat with 15,445 votes and the candidate who came top of the poll, U. N. Edbar, was known to have Mahasabha connections, although at the last minute Edbar gave up the party ticket to stand as an independent: Franchise, Elections in Bengal 1946, L/P&J/8/475, India Office Library and Records.

[6] The Mahasabha had two branches, both notoriously sluggish, in Burdwan and Midnapore. In 1942, the Midnapore branch claimed to have another outpost in Jhagram, but nothing was heard of it other than a passing reference to its existence during the Quit India movement.

[7] Ashutosh Lahiry to Kumud Chandra Chakravarty, 24 June 1948, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49.

members' from 'taking part in the proceedings of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha'.[8] This issue over the role of the eastern group opened up existing fault lines within the Mahasabha leadership.[9] In 1948, two Calcutta lawyers, N. C. Chatterjee and Debendranath Mukherjee, controlled the provincial executive of the Mahasabha. Their main rival, Ashutosh Lahiry, had quit Bengal for the centre in 1947, vowing never to return.[10] In Delhi, Lahiry was appointed general secretary of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, and from his base in the capital he continued to wield some influence over the Bengal party through those of his supporters who remained active in Bengal, particularly the coterie that ran the North Calcutta District Mahasabha. The struggle for supremacy between these two competing factions in the Bengal party cast a long shadow over all the Mahasabha's transactions in the new province.

When the question was formally raised of what, if any, say the East Pakistan members should have, the West Bengal Mahasabha's official line was that the easterners should be allowed to vote in party elections. This made political sense since the Mahasabha, in dire straits after Gandhi's assassination, could ill afford to disenfranchise loyal members who had stuck by the party in its times of trouble. But Lahiry's faction stuck to their guns; they fought a rearguard action against giving East Bengalis the vote, because they calculated such influence as they still had in the provincial party would be lost once the members from East Bengal could vote them off the executive. The Mahasabha in Bengal, already fractured, now broke up over this issue into two warring, and seemingly irreconcilable, camps.

Another crucial matter which divided the Mahasabha, in Bengal as in other parts of India, was whether Mookerjee's public statement that the

[8] Long-standing members of these bodies, ineffectual and few though they were, did not like the fact that 'large numbers from the Pakistan districts had been accepted [as members] and [had] been allowed the right to elect representatives to the Council of the Provincial Sabha': Ashutosh Lahiry to General Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha, 4 July 1948, *ibid.* See also the complaint of Hemchandra Mukherjee (Birbhum District Hindu Mahasabha) to Lahiry, 29 June 1949, *ibid.*

[9] Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee's autobiographical *Leaves from a diary* (Calcutta, 1993) reveals how intense were the differences between the leading personalities in the party before 1947.

[10] As Lahiry complained to one of his supporters, 'During the seven years that the new leaders of the Mahasabha have taken [over] the work of the Hindu Mahasabha I have been deliberately kept out from any position wherefrom I can take up organisational work with freedom according to my desire. Under the circumstances, I do not think it is necessary to waste my time over [the] Bengal organisation, and it is my definite decision not to return to public activity in Bengal anymore': Ashutosh Lahiry to Shibendra Shekhar Roy, 18 February 1947, AIHM Papers, File No. P-107/1947. See also Lahiry's letter to Sailendra Kumar Mukherjee, 22 September 1947, *ibid.*

Mahasabha had put a stop to its political activities was merely a tactical retreat, or whether it was actually intended as the first step in transforming a political party into a social and 'cultural' organisation, as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha claimed to be. One group, the Mahasabha's more liberal – or, rather, less hardline – wing, led by Dr Syama Prasad Mookerjee, saw merit in the Mahasabha permanently withdrawing from politics. In their view, there was no longer a need for a political party specifically to safeguard Hindu interests, now that partition had made India into a nation with an overwhelming Hindu majority which could be expected 'naturally' to serve Hindu interests.[11] In Bengal, Mookerjee's line was backed by the 'official group' and was pushed through despite much opposition within the party.[12] Even though Mookerjee's policy seemed to have won the day in West Bengal, at the centre there remained powerful voices in the party that were convinced that the Mahasabha must continue to have a political agenda to ensure that India fulfilled its 'Hindu' destiny.[13] On 8 August 1948, after a long and acrimonious debate, the Mahasabha's high command in Delhi, the Working Committee of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, voted to return to the political fray.[14] This was a blow to Mookerjee and his clique and a sign of his declining influence among the Mahasabha's leadership at the centre.

[11] As Mookerjee put it, 'in the India of today, more than 85 per cent of her people are Hindus and if they are unable to protect their own economic and political interests or India's inherent rights through the working of a fully Democratic constitution, no separate political party, which would confine its membership to the Hindu fold alone, could ever save Hindus or their country': press statement by Dr S. P. Mookerjee, *Statesman* (Calcutta), 24 November 1948; also cited in Bruce Graham, *Hindu nationalism and Indian politics. The origins and development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 14.

[12] The general secretary of the provincial executive reported that 'some members were greatly annoyed at this decision [to suspend political activities] and tabled a resolution to prove inconsistency and unsoundness of the decision but the Chairman ruled it out of order': General Secretary, Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha (henceforth BPHM), to General Secretary, AIHM, 2 April 1948, AIHM Papers, File No. C-171/1948. The working committee of the Hooghly District Hindu Conference and the North Calcutta district branch denounced the decision to suspend politics by resolutions passed on 17 and 25 April 1948; see AIHM Papers, File No. C-171/1948.

[13] Lahiry was among them, arguing that 'the Free Indian State must be erected on the basis of ancient Indian culture and it will be the Hindu [Maha]Sabha's main business to see that public opinion is mobilised along these lines with a view to secur[ing] a radical change in the Constitution making that is going on and to recreate the new India in social, cultural, political and economic spheres in consonance with the ancient Indian ideals as applied to modern conditions . . . we think that the spiritual and cultural heritage of India must be a sheet-anchor on which to fashion our future state': Ashutosh Lahiry to Ramendranath Ghosh, 19 April 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49.

[14] Ashutosh Lahiry to General Secretary, Mysore State Hindu Students' Federation, 13 August 1948, AIHM Papers, File No. C-175/1948–49.

With this issue out of the way, another deeply contentious matter arose which further divided the Mahasabha: whether it should continue to exclude Muslims. Mookerjee was prominent among those who felt that the time had come for a sea-change in the Mahasabha's strategy: the party should now accept people of all faiths, if not out of principled inclusiveness, at least for the persuasive tactical reason that public opinion, for the time being at least, had set its face against overtly communal organisations, and also because West Bengal, Mookerjee's home state, still had many Muslims in it. But others in the leadership feared – with good cause – that the Mahasabha would lose its defining characteristic if it ceased to be an exclusively Hindu party. Some hoped to bridge this particular divide by casuistry, widening the normal definition of 'Hindu' to include anybody who accepted India as his 'motherland' and 'holy land'.[15] By this redefinition, even Muslims could be deemed to be 'Hindus', that is citizens of Hindustan, as long as they declared their allegiance to India. Not surprisingly, these semantic metaphysics proved a bridge too far for an organisation whose *raison d'être* had until now been to defend Hindu India against 'the Muslim onslaught'.[16] When the Mahasabha bigwigs arrested in the Gandhi murder conspiracy case were let out of jail, the hardliners in the central leadership reasserted themselves. Dr Mookerjee found himself marginalised in his own party. The Working Committee of the all-India Mahasabha, fortified by the right-wingers, met on 6 and 7 November 1948, and decided that membership of the party was to be restricted to Hindus only. On 23 November 1948, Mookerjee resigned from the Mahasabha in protest. On 26 December 1948, the Mahasabha All-India Committee confirmed its decision to keep all communities other than Hindus out of the party, demonstrating how little they cared about Mookerjee's concerns.

Mookerjee's decline and fall from grace in the party in which he had been such a dominant presence revealed, albeit from a different angle, the

[15] Savarkar's definition of 'Hindu' included anyone who regarded 'the land of Bharatvarsha' as his motherland *and* his 'holy land', in other words, all members of faiths which had their origins in the sub-continent but excluding Muslims, Christians, Parsees and Jews whose 'holy land' was elsewhere. If the 'holy land' criterion was ditched, this definition included everyone, even Muslims, who declared allegiance to India.

[16] Lahiry explained, 'the Hindu Mahasabha during the British regime was more or less occupied in resisting the onslaught of the Moslems and also the appeasement policy of the Congress. In fact its only activities were concerned with Muslim politics': Ashutosh Lahiry to Ramendranath Ghosh, 19 April 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49. Debendranath Mukherjee argued that 'to call a Muslim or a Christian a Hindu for our political objective will be offending the basic principles underlying Hinduism and we shall be looked down [on] as the worse enemies of the Hindus than the Congress who so long described Hindus only as non-Muslims. Those who do not believe in the doctrine of rebirth . . . and those who hate us as idolaters cannot be called Hindus': Debendranath Mukherjee to Ashutosh Lahiry, 25 September 1948, *ibid*.

extent to which the mainstream of Indian politics had flowed past Bengal. In retrospect, it is clear that Mookerjee's strategy in his twilight years was driven by his concern somehow to give Bengal's Hindus a voice in the politics of all-India. In his view, this aim could be achieved only by a rapprochement at the centre between Bengal's leaders and the Congress high command. This strategy required Mookerjee to build bridges between the Mahasabha and the Bengal Congress; it also required him to shift the Mahasabha towards the middle ground of national politics in India. This was the direction in which Mookerjee was attempting to take the Mahasabha even before Gandhi's murder. When Mookerjee failed to persuade the all-India Mahasabha to abandon its extremist policies, it was further proof of Bengal's waning influence on the national stage, whether in the all-India Mahasabha or in the Congress at the centre.

In Bengal itself, Mookerjee's resignation was a grave blow to the Mahasabha. Bengal's Hindu political classes, including many who were not of the Mahasabha persuasion, held him in high esteem. After leaving the Mahasabha, Mookerjee set up another party of his own, the Jana Sangha (or People's Party) and took many Mahasabha loyalists in Bengal with him. Those who stayed on in the Mahasabha were now reduced to an even more demoralised rump.[17] In early 1949, the party was further weakened by a spate of resignations,[18] and several more branches were shut down as the Mahasabha's dispirited and depleted cadres in Bengal left the sinking ship.[19] In the meantime, back at provincial headquarters, fierce in-fighting between the Lahiry-backed North Calcutta committee and Bengal's 'official' 'leadership', continued unabated, frequently escalating into open warfare.[20]

[17] Lahiry advised them to emulate the Communist example in seeking 'inspiration from the ideal itself and not from personalities'. He exhorted them to 'look at the Socialist and Communist parties. Who are the big men guiding them? They get the inspiration from their own ideals. Similarly Mahasabhaites must forget personalities and learn to be inspired with the ideal which Veer Savarkar has set before them': Ashutosh Lahiry to M. Manna (assistant secretary, Muhammadpur thana Hindu Mahasabha, Sutahata, Midnapore), 6 January 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49.

[18] The branches in Malda and Birbhum were particularly badly affected. See Shibendu Shekhar Roy to Ashutosh Lahiry, 15 January 1949, *ibid.*; and Nityanarayan Banerjee to Ashutosh Lahiry, 14 February 1949, *ibid.*

[19] In February 1949, word came from Malda that the Mahasabha 'has lost its hold over the masses and the rank and file feel quite unhappy to continue it so we have dissolved [the Malda District Hindu Mahasabha]': Shibendu Shekhar Roy to Ashutosh Lahiry, 15 February 1949, *ibid.*

[20] Things became so bad that according to one report, 'the North Calcutta District Hindu Mahasabha [had] become something like [a] terror to the Provincial office'. Yet the provincial leadership was too weak to take the bold and simple step of disaffiliating the rebel committee. See Sailen Mookerjee to Ashutosh Lahiry, 15 March 1949, *ibid.*

It was this broken-backed and deeply divided party which in 1952 had to fight elections under new rules, with universal franchise and joint electorates, and without any reservations for religious minorities. Unsurprisingly, the Mahasabha in West Bengal did not know which way to turn. The nub of its dilemma was how to identify its natural constituents. Just as the Bengal Congress, so also the Mahasabha in West Bengal had to square the circle of hanging on to its traditional supporters while wooing new constituents in an electorate many times larger than had ever before gone to the polls. But the monied men who in the past had been patrons of the Mahasabha now rallied to the Congress, the party in power, which could reward them with the licences, permits and contracts they wanted. Within ten months of independence, Lahiry complained that 'the present patrons of the Hindu Mahasabha [in West Bengal] are mostly persons who would not think of spending any money for such purposes. Their patronage exists merely in extending . . . verbal and moral support.'[21] Indeed, he told his partymen in Burdwan that 'no big capitalist will give you anything, nor [should] we look to them for any help in our work'.[22] So it was imperative for the Mahasabha to find new friends and allies at the 'grass roots'.[23] Towards the end of 1949, the party tentatively tried to achieve an improbable metamorphosis into becoming 'an organisation for the masses'. As Lahiry pointed out, such a change would require the Mahasabha to 'follow a policy which will be contrary to the interests of the big capitalists'.[24] It also meant that the Mahasabha would have to tackle the parties of the left on their own turf. In November 1950, in its first essay in trade unionism, the Mahasabha set up in Calcutta an All-Bengal Hindu Sramik Sangha (Hindu Workers' Union).[25] Two months later, in January 1951, the newly established union confronted the Bata Shoe

[21] Ashutosh Lahiry to Sukumar Nandi (editor, *Hindu Bani*, Bankura), 18 June 1948, *ibid.*

[22] Ashutosh Lahiry to Srikumar Mitra, 27 February 1949, *ibid.*

[23] In reply to a query about how the Mahasabha might reposition itself, Narendranath Das of the *Hindusthan* (later party secretary for the Eastern zone) suggested that the party should strive to remove 'gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth, to assure a decent standard of living to the masses . . . and to secure some proprietary right to the labour in the factory or mines he works and to the peasant the land he tills . . .' Shibendu Shekhar Roy of Malda was 'of the opinion that you must pay particular attention to the economic programme. In a democratic state socialist tendencies should carefully be considered. Nationalisation of key industries should be organised': Shibendu Shekhar Roy to Ashutosh Lahiry, 23 August 1948, *ibid.*

[24] Ashutosh Lahiry to Srikumar Mitra, 27 February 1949, *ibid.*

[25] Chuni Lall Dhar, Organising Secretary, All-Bengal Hindu Sramik Sangha to President, Reception Committee, All-India Hindu Mahasabha, 21 December 1950, AIHM Papers, File No. C-184/1950 (Part II).

Company in its inaugural campaign of organising workers in the factories of Bengal.[26]

The Mahasabha's efforts to travel down this populist path were not a success. By veering to the left and seeking support among workers, it of course risked alienating what support remained among its traditional constituents.[27] Moreover, in seeking to enlist 'the masses', the Mahasabha faced fierce competition in West Bengal from every communist and socialist party which claimed to speak for the workers. Even the least impressive of these left-wing organisations had better connections on the shop-floor than the johnny-come-latelies from the Mahasabha. In any event, their efforts were quickly sabotaged by the all-India leaders, who loudly broadcast their scepticism about these wayward provincial moves to enlist the working classes.[28] From the very start, the Bengal Mahasabha's belated efforts to become 'an organisation of the masses' lacked credibility. It never had even a faint prospect of success.

The one potential constituency where the Mahasabha did have a good chance of fishing out some new support was the large and growing pool of refugees from East Bengal. Indeed, Syama Prasad Mookerjee was the first politician of stature to recognise that refugees from Bengal were about to become a powerful force in the politics of West Bengal, and he assiduously cultivated their support. Again and again in the Constituent Assembly, he spoke vehemently about the problems of refugees in West Bengal, fiercely criticising the Congress government's failure to rehabilitate them. Infamously, he even advocated that India should go to war with Pakistan to grab more land from East Pakistan in order to resettle the

[26] Chuni Lall Dhar to Staff Manager, Bata Shoe Company, 22 January 1951, AIHM Papers, File No. P-135/1951.

[27] In September 1951, at a Mahasabha meeting in Midnapore, 'most of the aristocracy kept away being either black-marketeers, license holders [or] Congressites': Narendra Nath Das to V. B. Khare, 10 September 1951, *ibid.*

[28] In April 1949, Sanat Kumar Roy Chowdhury, a leading Bengali Mahasabhaite, refused to attend the all-India Mahasabha conference at Puri, where someone like himself who thought that 'the party must adopt a programme appealing to the masses' would be 'a misfit': Sanat Kumar Roy Chowdhury to Ashutosh Lahiry, 23 April 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. C-175/1948–49. He was right. When the all-India Mahasabha met in Calcutta in December 1949, Khare declared that 'the present is not the time for disturbing the owners and tenants of the lands which are yielding full quotas of . . . produce' and insisted that 'the present situation . . . does not warrant too much official interference in industrial enterprise, and if an industrial crisis is to be averted, the ever-increasing uncertainty to the industrialists and constant danger of discriminatory legislation must give place to a sympathetic government attitude'. He warned the labourer that 'while pitching his demands too high, he must be made to realise that his choice lies between his present, fairly tolerable, lot and future dire unemployment': V. B. Khare, presidential speech, All-India Hindu Mahasabha Conference, Calcutta, 23 December 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. C-184/1950 (Part II).

Hindu migrants. These quixotic moves made him the tub-thumping hero of Calcutta's sprawling refugee camps and squatter colonies long before the Communists began systematically to take up the refugee cause. Mookerjee's strident rhetoric was backed, moreover, by painstaking work on the ground by a handful of Mahasabha activists. Prominent among them was Mahadev Bhattacharyya, a talented organiser who was flexible in his tactics and pragmatic enough to make common cause on behalf of the refugees with communist radicals, ideological differences notwithstanding.[29] In September 1948, when the Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad (the All-Bengal Refugee Council of Action, or NVBKP) was set up, Bhattacharyya was elected its secretary, and in December 1948 he became its president.[30]

Yet the Mahasabha was not able to translate these early advantages in the enterprise of wooing refugees into lasting political gains. It made some cardinal mistakes in its campaigns, the most important being its fatal propensity to take refugee support for granted. The refugees having suffered at the hands of East Bengal's Muslims, the leaders blithely assumed that their politics were bound to be 'communal', or at least in sympathy with the Mahasabha's overtly communal Hindu stance. The party took few steps in practice to help Mahadev Bhattacharyya's efforts on the ground: a study of the Mahasabha papers shows that it did not make relief work among the refugees a priority in its agenda.[31] Yet those who led the Mahasabha in Bengal shared this misplaced confidence that the refugees would vote for them, come what may. An egregious example of this fatal complacency was Lahiri's conviction that the hundred thousand or more refugees in Nadia would all turn out to cast their vote as a man for the Mahasabha, telling his minions in the field to make sure 'that all refugees are enrolled in the voters' list', because, as Lahiri and all the rest assumed, they 'were bound to' vote for the Mahasabha candidate.[32]

Another big mistake of the Mahasabha was to be seen to be more concerned about the plight of middle-class refugees than about those of 'the labour class'. From their own incorrigibly bhadralok perspective, the Mahasabha bosses believed that the poorest refugees would 'somehow maintain their families', while middle-class refugees – their fellows whose plight they could understand and with which they could

[29] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 52–3. [30] *Ibid.*, pp. 49–52, 62–3.

[31] Paradoxically, as the AIHM Papers show, the Delhi leadership of the Mahasabha proved to be more active in promoting the cause of refugee relief than its provincial counterpart in Bengal.

[32] Ashutosh Lahiry to Mahindra Chandra Das, 8 October 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49.

sympathise – would survive only if the state helped to rehabilitate them.[33] This was a deeply wrong-headed assumption, which took no account of the complex realities of transit camps and squatter colonies where the poorest refugees struggled to survive. For it, the Mahasabha paid a heavy price at the polls. As time passed, it became increasingly the case that the middle-class refugees from East Bengal formed only a part of the refugee population as a whole, and an increasingly small fraction in the camps where the most powerful refugee movements came to be organised. Instead of concentrating exclusively on the middle classes, the Mahasabha would have done much better to build upon its shuddhi-based links with the lower-caste and tribal-camp refugees whom the government most conspicuously failed to help and whose rehabilitation proved so difficult to contrive. Indeed, refugee peasant families who settled in large numbers along the Nadia border after communal violence drove them from their homes might well have been receptive to Mahasabha propaganda. Government's plans to pitchfork Namasudra peasants into unfriendly and far-away tracts, wholly unsuited to growing rice, and the way it treated them as 'deserters' when they refused to remain in exile, would have provided grist to the Mahasabha mill if they had only known how to gather it in. But the party had no significant part to play in the rising tide of protest by 'labour class' camp refugees against government's resettlement policies. Not surprisingly, where the Mahasabha feared to tread, parties of the left stepped in.

More predictably, the Mahasabha's equivocations towards Muslims damaged its electoral prospects in West Bengal. In December 1948, the all-India Mahasabha decided to keep non-Hindus out of their party. This went down well with its hardliners, and with some ward bosses in the refugee colonies, as well as with those of the Hindu middle classes who took the extreme view that Muslims should be disenfranchised in independent India.[34] In Delhi, Lahiri had lent his support to an unbending anti-Muslim line, arguing in September 1948 that 'Moslems have no right to take part in elections here. They are essentially Pakistanees and the only honourable course for them is not to support any party.'[35] But as

[33] Sri Kumar Mitra (Secretary, Burdwan District Hindu Mahasabha) to Dr B. C. Roy, 30 August 1951, AIHM Papers, File No. P-135/1951.

[34] The Bengal Provincial Hindu Students' Federation, for instance, openly stated that 'Muslims in India should not be given the right to vote. We should always remember that they are the cancer of human civilisation ... Muslims in India should be treated as alien [unless] they change their doctrines of religion': Ashoke Kumar Chakraborty, President, Bengal Provincial Hindu Students' Federation to Ashutosh Lahiry, 6 January 1948, AIHM Papers, File No. C-175/1948–49.

[35] Ashutosh Lahiry to Shibendu Shekhar Roy, 3 September 1948, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49.

elections approached, the Mahasabha's provincial leadership in West Bengal, mindful of the size of the Bengali Muslim vote, began to dither on the appropriate line to take on Muslims. Separate electorates and reserved seats (except for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes) were now a thing of the past. Every Indian adult, man and woman alike, regardless of caste, community or religion, had the vote. After partition, Muslims remained one in five of West Bengal's entire population. So it followed that there would be many Muslim voters in every constituency which the Mahasabha intended to contest. In Murshidabad, where the Mahasabha still had one of its few remaining strongholds, Muslims were actually in a majority. In several thanas of neighbouring Malda, Muslims outnumbered Hindus; in other constituencies, they were sufficiently numerous to hold the electoral balance. As one party loyalist from Malda reported, 'everyone [was] placating them [the Muslims]'. The 'main question', as he saw it, was whether the Mahasabha should 'be with the wind or against it'.[36] Eventually, in October 1950, the Mahasabha's Working Committee in Delhi reversed its earlier decision to exclude Muslims, and momentously but belatedly resolved to 'throw open its doors to all non-Hindu minorities' in order to 'allay' their 'anxieties and apprehensions'.[37] In July 1951, a party boss in Bengal echoed Delhi's line when he publicly announced that 'the Mahasabha makes no distinction between Hindus and non-Hindus so long as they treat this land as their mother country'.[38] But this change of tack was palpably half-hearted and insincere, and above all too late. It did not persuade West Bengal's Muslims, particularly after the savage anti-Muslim pogrom in February 1950 in which Mahasabha members were suspected of having had a hand. All that this 'change of heart' succeeded in achieving was to confuse the Mahasabha's faithful rank and file and to lose it votes among communally minded sections of the refugees whom the party, if it had stuck to its last, had the best chance of winning over.

By 1952, when the first general elections in independent India were held, no one quite knew what the Bengal Mahasabha stood for. On paper, it still possessed an organisation with 125 branches in Bengal,[39] but most

[36] Shibendu Shekhar Roy to Ashutosh Lahiry, 12 September 1949, AIHM Papers, File No. P-116/1948–49.

[37] Text of Resolutions of the Working Committee of the All-India Hindu Mahasabha (as reprinted in *Mahratta*, 20 October 1950), AIHM Papers, File No. C-184 (Part II)/1950.

[38] Statement issued by Debendranath Mukherjee on 13 July 1951, AIHM Papers, File No. C-175/1948–49.

[39] Eighty-three of these were in the urban and industrial belt, which included Calcutta, Hooghly, Howrah and the 24 Parganas. Thirty-nine were spread fairly more or less evenly between Birbhum (eleven), Burdwan (seven), Bankura (seven), Midnapore (six) and Nadia (eight). The four northern districts, Murshidabad, Malda, Jalpaiguri and

Table 6.1. *Membership and strength of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal, December 1956*

Name of district	Strength according to district report	Strength according to Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha Scrutiny Committee Report
Darjeeling	Nil	Nil
Jalpaiguri	Nil	Nil
Cooch Behar	150	11
West Dinajpur	Nil	Nil
Malda	40	Nil
Murshidabad	25	Nil
Nadia	Nil	335
24 Parganas	200	395
Calcutta	1,500	1,357
Howrah	550	96
Hooghly	300	517
Burdwan	500	179
Midnapore	196	406
Birbhum	650	Nil
Bankura	626	405
Purulia	Nil	Nil
TOTAL WEST BENGAL	3,237	3,690
EAST BENGAL		190
Total Bengal membership	**3,237**	**3,880**

The figures are replicated without amendment from the original.
Source: GB IB File 170–57.

of these were moribund (see table 6.1). The party's provincial headquarters, constantly wracked by internal dissent, were unable to give their members a clear line on policy, ideology, strategy or tactics.[40] The Mahasabha's dismal showing in the 1952 elections, despite the deal it struck with Dr Mookerjee's fledgling Jana Sangha, is a measure of how comprehensively the party in West Bengal had lost its way. Of a total of

Cooch Behar, had only one branch apiece, while Darjeeling and West Dinajpur had none. See the list of Bengal Provincial Hindu Mahasabha branches, AIHM Papers, File No. P-135/1951.

40 In the general secretary's words, 'This is the condition of our office here. The President [N.N. Chatterjee] is ill. One of the Vice-Presidents [Pandit Narendra Nath Das] has boycotted the office. Sri Ashutosh Lahiry, President of the All-India Parliamentary Board, has also non-co-operated and we have got to fight the Congress, the People's party of Dr Mookerjee, the Krishak Praja Mazdoor Party of Profulla Ghosh and Kripalani, leaving aside the Communists and the Socialists': Debendranath Mukherjee to Mahant Digvijainath, 15 July 1951, AIHM Papers, File No. P-135/1951.

238 seats, it won only 4. It polled a tiny fraction of all the votes cast (roughly 2 in every 10,000).[41] The Jana Sangha did marginally better, winning nine seats in all. Together, the Mahasabha and Jana Sangha were reduced to an insignificant party with just over 5 per cent of the seats in the West Bengal legislature.

The pattern revealed by the Mahasabha's collapse at the polls is significant. Three of the four seats won by the Mahasabha were in one district alone, Bankura, and the fourth was in Burdwan district. Of the Jana Sangha's nine successes at the polls, three were also in Bankura, five in Midnapore and one in the 24 Parganas.[42] Significantly, these constituencies had very few refugees. Bankura and Midnapore, which together accounted for eleven of the thirteen constituencies which the Mahasabha and Jana Sangha won, were the two districts most resolutely shunned by refugees. The constituencies where refugees clustered – that is, Calcutta, the 24 Parganas and Nadia, in which two-thirds of all refugees had settled by 1951 – did not vote for the parties of the Hindu right. In Calcutta, four of the five Mahasabha candidates managed to win only a handful of votes, and the fifth, who did a little better, still trailed a long way behind his rivals.[43] The Mahasabha's sole candidate at Hasnabad in the 24 Parganas took thirteenth place in a contest in which seventeen candidates competed, some of whom could be described as optimists without any electoral experience or any chance of success;[44] and in Nadia, where Lahiry had blithely depended upon refugees marching in a solid phalanx to vote for his party, the Mahasabha at the end of the day put up only one candidate, and that single representative of the right won hardly any refugee votes.[45] For its part, the Jana Sangha did not do much better.[46] In constituencies where there were many low-caste refugees, as in Nadia which had many Namasudra peasants, the Mahasabha candidate received less than one vote in ten. As for winning the votes of the 'labour classes', the Jana Sangha did put up some candidates in the mill townships at Barrackpore, Bhatpara, Titagarh and Garden Reach, but not one came anywhere near winning.

[41] D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*. [42] *Ibid.*

[43] The Jana Sangha put up eleven candidates in Calcutta, but none of them did well. See D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*, pp. 31–6.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[45] The Mahasabha candidate in Ranaghat in Nadia received only 7 per cent of all the votes cast: *ibid.*, p. 25.

[46] The Jana Sangha put up four candidates in Nadia district. Only one of them did even respectably: Makhanlal Roy Chowdhury was runner-up with 10,863 votes in Kaliagunj, but his rival, a Muslim Congressman, won by a margin of over 10,000 votes: *ibid.*, p. 24.

The Hindu Mahasabha and its offshoot, the Jana Sangha, managed to maintain this dismal record of failure at the hustings in West Bengal in every subsequent election in the 1950s and 1960s and again in the general elections of 1971. After 1952, and until the elections of 1967, the Mahasabha did not win a single seat in West Bengal. Neither did the Jana Sangha, leaderless after Mookerjee's death in 1953. In the election of 1967 and again in 1971, the Mahasabha and the Jana Sangha were virtually wiped out, winning only one seat each. Since 1971, candidates on their tickets have not once successfully contested any constituency in West Bengal in any general election.[47] These two parties demonstrated conclusively that they had utterly failed to make an impression on Bengal's politics. They neglected to cultivate the largest new constituency created by partition – the refugees. Yet it was with refugees that the Mahasabha had potentially the best connections; and it was they whose support its leaders had clearly expected to receive by a sort of communal divine right. Nor did the party succeed in retaining such backing as they had previously had from their other constituents, whether the monied men of Calcutta or the low-caste and tribal groups they had recently persuaded to join the Hindu fold. Instead the partition of Bengal, for which the Hindu Mahasabha had fought so hard, cast the party definitively and irretrievably into the political wilderness.

Surviving the great divide: the left and partition

In striking contrast to the Mahasabha, parties on the left in Bengal made large advances at the polls after independence. In the aftermath of partition, they joined the political mainstream and in due course came to control it. In particular, the Communist Party of India, the Forward Bloc and the Revolutionary Socialist Party not only survived the upheavals of partition, they also gained ground with Bengal's new voters and severally and jointly became a durable and effective opposition to the Congress (see table 6.2).

In August 1947, no one could have predicted that these three parties would, in a few short years, emerge as a powerful opposition capable of challenging Congress; still less that they would join together in a united front. Admittedly they had a similar genealogy: each was descended to a greater or lesser extent from one or other of Bengal's terrorist organisations of old, Anushilan and Jugantar. But this common pedigree made for differences, not unity: long-established loyalties to competing leaders

[47] See appendix.

Table 6.2. *Percentage of votes polled by left-wing opposition parties in West Bengal legislative assembly elections (1952–1969)*

Party	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969
Communist Party of India	10.60	17.82	24.96	6.53	6.78
Communist Party of India (Marxist) (founded in 1964)				18.11	19.55
Forward Bloc	5.29	3.84	4.61	3.87	5.40
Forward Bloc (Marxist)	—	0.85	0.32	0.21	0.19
Forward Bloc Ruikar (merged with PSP after 1952 elections)	1.51	—	—	—	—
Revolutionary Socialist Party	0.86	1.24	2.56	2.14	2.75
Socialist Unity Centre	—	0.75	0.73	0.72	1.48
Revolutionary Communist Party of India	0.43	0.42	0.42	0.31	0.37
Workers' Party of India	—	—	0.28	0.34	0.35
TOTAL	18.69	24.92	33.88	32.23	36.87

Source: Marcus Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, MA, 1971, p. 116.

(or *dadas* as they were known) of terrorist cells and equally deep-seated rivalries and jealousies among these fiercely distinctive groups persisted long after both Anushilan and Jugantar had changed their spots and renounced violence. The role of erstwhile terrorists in setting up the Communist Party of India is well known; and many more men from Anushilan and Jugantar joined the CPI while they were detenus in jail during the 'Communist Consolidation' drive of the mid-1930s. But these communist under-trials did not sweep all before them. Indeed, their self-righteous denunciations of the 'mistakes' of their fellow terrorists did not always endear them to those who had done time for the cause.[48]

The Revolutionary Socialist Party was the creation of one such group. The RSP was set up by a caucus of young members of Anushilan who, despite their conversion to Marxism, refused to join the CPI while in jail during the 1930s.[49] In the heyday of terrorism, the backwaters of riverine Noakhali in eastern Bengal had provided safe havens for Anushilan fugitives from the law. After they were released from jail, Pratul

[48] See the extremely acerbic 'Introductory remarks' in Satyendra Narayan Mazumdar, *In search of a revolutionary ideology and a revolutionary programme. A study in the transition from national revolutionary terrorism to communism*, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 1–100.

[49] Interview with Pratul Chaudhuri, NMML Oral History Transcript No. 495, pp. 47–8 (henceforth 'interview with Pratul Chaudhuri'); interview with Pannalal Dasgupta, NMML Oral History Transcript No. 101, p. 15 (henceforth 'interview with Pannalal Dasgupta').

Chaudhuri, Makhan Paul and Jogesh Mazumdar toured their old haunts in Noakhali by boat, recruiting former Anushilan members or sympathisers into their still unnamed party, often pulling them out of the CPI in the process. In 1939, working under cover of the Congress, Pratul Chaudhuri's group trounced the Communists in the Noakhali District Congress Committee elections.[50] In 1940, its members got together in Ramgarh in the United Provinces with members of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army (an up-country adjunct of Anushilan), and they formally set themselves up as the Revolutionary Socialist Party, an organisation separate and distinct both from the Congress and from the Communists.[51] The new party threw itself whole-heartedly into the Quit India movement of 1942 at a time when the Communists, in contrast, urged their comrades to wage a 'people's war' against fascism. This underlined a deep, and increasingly unbridgeable, divide between the Communists and the RSP. But the Quit India movement won the new party a measure of popular support in the swamps and coastal tracts of eastern Bengal, and also in a few pockets in north Bengal, particularly in Murshidabad and Jalpaiguri. But partition deprived the fledgling party of its bases of support, almost all of which went to Pakistan. Leached of such strength as it had so painstakingly built up, this enfeebled body was further weakened when, just before the 1952 elections, two factions in the party split away from the RSP.[52]

Subhas Chandra Bose set up the Forward Bloc in 1939 after being expelled from the Congress. Key terrorist factions in Jugantar – the Bengal Volunteers and Sri Sangha groups – had backed Bose when in December he reacted by challenging the All-India Congress Committee at Tripuri. Bose also got some backing from a motley collection of dissidents who, for a host of different reasons, did not like the Congress. But soon after he formed the Bloc, Subhas was put under house arrest, then made his celebrated escape through Kabul to Germany where he lent his voice to the Axis powers in their war against Britain. So Bose never had an opportunity to organise his allies in Bengal into a cohesive party with a structure and distinctive ideology of its own. The Bloc did, however, manage to hold on to many of Netaji's diverse constituents and gained some reflected glory from the later sacrifices of the Indian National Army against the Raj. But a key legacy of the Forward Bloc was its abiding and deep mistrust of the Communists: in the florid vocabulary of the day, they were denounced as the 'running dogs of imperialism', and, in their turn, they branded 'Netaji' as a Fascist 'quisling'.

[50] Interview with Pratul Chaudhuri, p. 56. [51] *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.
[52] M. Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, Cambridge, MA, 1971, pp. 117–18.

By 1947, the Forward Bloc had troubles of its own. Subhas Bose was dead, killed in 1945 in a plane crash in the Far East, even though many of his devotees waited – as Barbarossa's disciples had done in another time and in another country – for their hero's second coming. The Bloc's leaders had parted ways with Sarat Bose, Netaji's older brother, before 1947.[53] After partition and independence, in good family tradition Sarat promptly set up another party of his own, the Socialist Republican Party. Having lost both Bose brothers from the helm, the Bloc rapidly drifted into endemic feuding, with Leela Roy and her faction going their own way. After partition, this split was given the stamp of formality when Leela Roy's group fought the 1952 elections as a party in its own right, known as Forward Bloc (Ruikar). Later, the Marxists in the Forward Bloc also decided to split away from the main Bloc, setting up shop as the appropriately (if unimaginatively) named Marxist Forward Bloc.

Of all the parties on the left in 1947, the Communist Party of India possessed the strongest organisation. In its cadres were some 5,000 full-time paid activists. Many more were members of other 'front' organisations which the CPI 'influenced' from behind the scenes: trades unions, Kisan Sabhas (peasant committees), student unions and women's organisations (see tables 6.3 and 6.4). In the short span of time from 1942 to 1945, during which the Communists were able to operate openly and lawfully as a 'people's war' party, they significantly extended the range of their support.[54] Yet the party was still not able to pose a serious challenge to the Congress. Much mud was thrown at the party for 'selling out' to the British during the Quit India movement, and some of it had stuck. The charge that the Communists were not a 'national' party, but agents of the Comintern who did the bidding of the Politburo in Moscow, also weakened their credentials in India.

In the years after independence, the principal weakness of the CPI was its doctrinal confusion. A central question which it found difficult to resolve – ironically not unlike its Mahasabha rival – was whether to support the Congress government or oppose it. In 1942, the CPI had unwisely lent its backing for the demand for Pakistan, on the grounds that this was the product of a genuine Muslim nationalism. From independence in 1947 until the first general elections in 1952, the party remained unsure of how to react to India's new government. In 1947, the CPI

[53] In 1945 and early 1946, Sarat Bose used such influence as he still had to try and damp down the violent demonstrations in Calcutta demanding the release of the 'INA accused'. For this 'betrayal', he was expelled from the Forward Bloc.

[54] Sanjoy Bhattacharya, 'The colonial state and the Communist Party of India, 1942–1945. A reappraisal', *South Asia Research*, 15, 1 (1995).

Table 6.3. *The Communist Party in united Bengal, May Day 1943*

District units under Bengal Provincial Committee	Total no. of party members	Total no. of whole-timers	Whole-timers with party wage	Workers	Kisans	Students	Women	Muslims	Others
West Bengal districts									
Calcutta	649	75	48	275	—	168	67	?	218
Jalpaiguri	252	21	13	40	147	16	14	20	40
Hooghly	130	31	18	12	22	23	9	2	58
Howrah	228	30	18	45	22	11	2	5	41
24 Parganas	176	21	21	40	17	11	1	12	29
Nadia	111	22	18	25	22	19	2	14	43
Burdwan	75	20	23	5	53	11	2	10	
Murshidabad	31	3	3	—	3	13	—	3	15
Birbhum	79	11	7	—	44	12	10	3	19
Bankura	39	5	5	4	3	16	6	—	12
Midnapore	37	5	?				3		
Malda	52	15	8	5	21	5	4	3	17
Dinajpore	263	7	20	—	206	21	16	10	26
TOTAL	**2,122**	**266**	**202**	**451**	**560**	**326**	**136**	**82**	**518**
East Bengal districts									
Chittagong	224	34	60	Nil	40	45	45	?	81
Rangpore	230	46	23	—	98	39	19	24	81
Mymensingh	184	91	22	1	68	29	20	19	91
Dacca	319	77	34	100	10	47	30		169
Barisal	149	22	13	—	4	24	38	2	95
Tippera	102	20	6						

Table 6.3. *(cont.)*

District units under Bengal Provincial Committee	Total no. of party members	Total no. of whole-timers	Whole-timers with party wage	Workers	Kisans	Students	Women	Muslims	Others
Jessore	100	28	8	3	20	19	2	15	57
Khulna	73	28	2	2	15	10	7		24
Rajshahi	107	19	10	6	11	39	25	8	35
Faridpur	93	12	8	3	6	17	8	1	48
Noakhali	75	19	17	—	21	4	9	5	45
TOTAL	**1,636**	**396**	**203**	**115**	**293**	**273**	**203**	**74**	**726**

Source: Saroj Mukhopadhyay, *Bharater Communist Party o amra*, Calcutta, 1989, Appendix A, pp. 438–9.

Table 6.4. *Mass organisations behind the Communist Party in Bengal, May Day 1943*

	Kisan Sabha membership*	Trade union membership**	Trade union units	Primary members (?), Women's front	Atmaraksha Samiti members***	Primary members (?), Students' Front	Student Federation members	Student units
West Bengal districts								
Calcutta		12,172	24	67	4,000	168	2,500	15
Jalpaiguri	10,686	600	2	14	510	16	405	4
Hooghly	5,133	953	6	9	636	23	644	6
Howrah	3,750	8,052	11	2	954	11	750	7
24 Parganas	3,766	3,845	4	1	—	11	430	3
Nadia	4,073	1,684	4	2	103	19	810	15
Burdwan	3,563	995	5	3	200	11	700	14
Murshidabad	3,000	200	1	—	—	13	280	11
Birbhum	1,625			10	—	12	300	5
Bankura	668	1,500	2	11	1,000	16	640	8
Midnapore	3,354	(?)		3	200	—	100	—
Malda	8,089	150	1	4	160	3	200	3
Dinajpore	13,000			16	600	21	375	4
TOTAL	**60,707**	**30,051**	**60**	**142**	**8,363**	**324**	**8,134**	**95**
East Bengal districts								
Chittagong	4,000	276		45	4,160	45	2,272	42
Rangpur	26,197	137	1	19	1,384	39	1,000	5
Mymensingh	12,852	295	3	20	2,075	29	1,000	35
Dacca	7,000	2,745	5	30	2,275	47	1,200	25
Barisal	2,062			38	1,491	24	859	8
Tippera	8,500			—	—	—	400	—
Jessore	3,400	225	2	2	50	16	805	25

Table 6.4. *(cont.)*

	Kisan Sabha membership *	Trade union membership **	Trade union units	Primary members (?), Women's front	Atmaraksha Samiti members ***	Primary members (?), Students' Front	Student Federation members	Student units
Khulna	9,160	358	3	7	535	10	750	25
Rajshahi	2,176	204	2	25	830	39	661	7
Faridpore	1,233			8	812	17	695	20
Noakhali	3,652			—	110	4	400	7
Pabna	733	200	1	28	700	29	465	9
TOTAL	**80,965**	**4,440**	**17**	**222**	**14,422**	**299**	**10,507**	**208**

The figures have been replicated without amendment from the original.
Notes: To this table, Mukhopadhyay appended the following explanatory notes:
* 634 Kisan Sabha Primary Committees, of which 360 active. 425 whole-timers in the Kisan Front.
** In 6 industrial districts, total number of whole timers on party wage in T.U. [Trade Union] front is 67. Out of 36,226 membership in Key and Essential T.U.s is 29,073, Jute – 8,052, Iron – 8,054, Textile – 5,200, Railway – 3,187, Essential Services – 4,850.
*** Volunteers – 1,018, membership of Girl Students Association – 3,050, ARS Committees – 125, J.Y. Sale by women – 903 and P.W – 354.
Source: Saroj Mukhopadhyay, *Bharater Communist Party o amra*, Calcutta, 1989, Appendix B and C.

followed the 'P. C. Joshi' line which was to act as a 'loyal opposition' to Nehru's government. In February 1948, it changed tack, when B. T. Ranadive's extremist group took control in the CPI and backed the 'Zhdanov' line of armed insurrection against 'the bourgeois–landlord' state. A year later, in June 1949, the Soviets presented the CPI leaders with an impossible dilemma by requiring that the revolution in independent India 'be anti-imperialist and not anti-capitalist'. To pile chaos upon a mountain of confusion, Moscow now ordered the CPI to follow the Chinese path to revolution. By 1950, Ranadive's strategy of revolutionary insurrection had been discredited. In 1951, Ajoy Ghosh led the party back to constitutional communism, proclaiming its support for a broad democratic alliance with other left-wing parties, to challenge the Congress at the polls.[55] Anyone following the Communist Party of India in these giddy twists and turns might reasonably have expected it to lose direction and crash into a self-inflicted oblivion.

On the face of it, therefore, the prospects in partitioned Bengal of these parties on the left were not good. Yet, surprisingly, they did well and they learnt to work together. Between 1952 and 1962, the RSP trebled its support at the polls, from just under 1 per cent to 3 per cent of all the votes cast, a share admittedly still tiny but growing steadily from a low starting point in the new context of a hugely enlarged electorate. In 1952, the RSP had not a single member in the West Bengal Assembly; by 1969, it had twelve. The Forward Bloc's share of the vote, if all its offshoots are thrown into the sum, remained more or less constant at roughly between 5 and 6 per cent, but the number of seats the Bloc won rose from eleven in 1952 to almost double that, twenty-one, in 1969. The CPI made the most dramatic advances. In 1952, it won twenty-eight seats and became the largest opposition party in the West Bengal Assembly, polling more than one in ten of all votes cast. A decade later, one in four of the electorate voted for the CPI, and it had fifty MLAs under its whip in the Assembly. Even after the party split in 1964, it retained the loyalty of most of its voters. In 1969, the CPI and its larger offshoot, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), polled over 26 per cent of the votes and won 110 seats in the Assembly. Taken together, the big three parties of the left increased their combined share of the vote from about 3 per cent of those enfranchised in the limited electorate before 1947 to about 18 per cent of a much larger electorate by 1952 and, in a ten-fold jump, more than 30 per cent in 1967. In 1967, their eighty-five members taken together constituted a third of the Bengal Legislative Assembly. By 1969, their combined

[55] For a detailed account, see Sengupta, *Communism in Indian politics*, pp. 26–32.

tally of 155 members in the Assembly gave them an absolute majority. Before partition, only two Communists had seats in the Bengal Assembly. By 1969, the Communists had become the largest single party in the Assembly of West Bengal, a remarkable transformation by any standards.

The reasons for the Communist advance in West Bengal are complex and have many facets. This account will concentrate on how and why the parties of the left after 1947 were able successfully to exploit the new political circumstances of West Bengal. Partition did not wreak the same degree of havoc on the parties of the left as it did on the Congress or the Mahasabha. Admittedly, the RSP lost almost all its support base to East Pakistan and most of its members came to West Bengal as refugees. But while the Congress and the Mahasabha did not know what to do with its members from East Bengal, the RSP flung open its doors to its comrades from Pakistan. By letting in the East Bengalis, the RSP saw that it would be better placed to win support from refugees from Noakhali, who, even before partition, were huddled together in makeshift camps in South Calcutta. But the main cause of the extraordinary cohesiveness of the RSP was the powerful mortar of personal loyalties. Itself a breakaway organisation, these bonds held the small party together while others fell apart.

In consequence, the Revolutionary Socialist Party survived and prospered. So too did the Forward Bloc, albeit for rather different reasons. Subhas Bose's strongholds had been in the districts of West Bengal. Midnapore in south-western Bengal had been the base of operations for the 'Bengal Volunteers', a terrorist-infiltrated voluntary organisation which had provided Subhas with sepoys for his local skirmishes.[56] In the 24 Parganas and Nadia, former terrorists were among Bose's staunchest lieutenants,[57] and of course Calcutta and its urban environs were Subhas's personal parade ground. From their home in Woodburn Park, the Bose brothers had spun a web of clientage and support which covered much of the city. Even after his expulsion from Congress in 1940, many Calcutta wards remained loyal to their leader Netaji.[58] By late 1945 and early 1946, Bose's popularity reached its peak among the city's volatile youth and urban poor, as was clearly shown by the unprecedented turnout at demonstrations in November 1945 against the sentences meted out to those found guilty in the INA trials. By contrast, Bose's support in East

[56] L. Gordon, *Bengal. The nationalist movement*, p. 177. [57] *Ibid.*, p. 250.

[58] Writing to the AICC secretary in December 1947, one Congressman pointed out that Amar Krishna Basu, the president of the North Calcutta DCC, had campaigned alongside Sarat Bose for a sovereign, independent and united Bengal, which suggests that his committee had stayed in the camp of the Bose brothers: Sudhir Kumar Ghosh to AICC Secretary, 23 December 1947, AICC-I, PC-4/1946–48.

Bengal, in particular among terrorist factions in Mymensingh, did not survive the upheavals of the early 1940s, when Surendra Mohan Ghosh broke with Subhas and took Mymensingh's Jugantar faction with him into the 'official' Congress. By the mid-1940s, such support as the Forward Bloc enjoyed came predominantly from western Bengal. This demonstrated that partition had left the bases of support of the Bloc largely intact.

Of the three left-wing parties, the CPI alone had some support throughout undivided Bengal before 1947. In 1943, it had about the same amount of backing in western Bengal as it did in the east, with a hard core of about 2,000 dedicated party members in each of the two parts.[59] Inevitably, Communist-controlled trade unions tended to be concentrated in western Bengal's industrial belt or in the tea plantations of the north, which accounted for eight in ten of their 35,000 members.[60] But in other mass 'front' organisations which the Communists sponsored, such as the Kisan Sabhas, women's or students' organisations, their members were spread fairly evenly between east and west, as table 6.3 shows. In the four years before independence, these numbers grew,[61] but their geographical spread did not change significantly.[62]

With about half its supporters situated in eastern Bengal, the Communist Party of India might have expected to be badly hurt by partition.[63] But in 1947 its central leadership took a crucial step which limited the damage. It decided that the party would challenge the logic of partition and continue to work as one organisation both in India and in Pakistan. It directed its members who found themselves in Pakistan to stay where they were, and to remain under the direction of the party's central and provincial committees. Members who disobeyed these instructions faced the draconian penalty which the Communists, as a

[59] The eastern districts had a few more members than the western, but the difference was not large: Saroj Mukhopadhyay, *Bharater Communist Party o amra* ('The Communist Party of India and ourselves'), Calcutta, 1986, Appendix A, p. 439. See also table 6.3 in this book.

[60] Mukhopadhyay, *Bharater Communist Party*, Appendix A, p. 439.

[61] According to Franda, in 1947, the Communist Party of India had almost 20,000 members, of whom most were in East Bengal: Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*, p. 13. Franda does not reveal how he arrived at these figures, and they seem a trifle on the high side.

[62] A description of how the party expanded, actively recruiting new members in the 1940s, suggests that this was happening throughout Bengal, not only in the eastern districts: see Mukhopadhyay, *Bharater Communist Party*, pp. 5–10, 24–5, 30–1 and 238–41.

[63] Indeed, M. A. Rasul admits that, after partition, the Kisan Sabha movement 'suffered very badly in Bengal and the Punjab'. Sadly, he does not elaborate further or give any details about the impact of partition on the organisation: M. A. Rasul, *A history of the All India Kisan Sabha*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 150.

matter of course, imposed on the recalcitrant, namely expulsion from the party.[64] The CPI held to this line until 1951. Evidence suggests that this decision flowed from considerations of ideological correctness rather than pragmatic calculations of advantage. From the standpoint of a party leadership committed to secular politics, hostility between the communities was 'false consciousness' which would disappear once the masses recognised their 'objective material conditions'. As Prafulla Chakrabarti suggests, in sticking to this dogma the CPI ignored the realities on the ground and put its predominantly Hindu members in East Pakistan[65] into mortal danger.[66] And yet, with the benefit of hindsight, this policy proved to be not entirely misconceived and not without some advantage to the party. By requiring its members in East Bengal to stay on where they were, the CPI spared itself the disruptive task of trying to integrate 2,000 elite cadres, some 500 or so primary members and 1,000 or more 'front' organisers from East Bengal into its organisation in West Bengal. By threatening those of its members who disobeyed with expulsion, essentially the CPI drove those who left East Bengal underground, having to hide their identity in the mass of refugees. There they continued to work surreptitiously in the Communist cause, without arousing the suspicions of their party bosses, the government, the police and indeed the refugee populations themselves which, at least to begin with, had little sympathy for the Communists. In a party as highly centralised as the CPI, keeping the state committee structure in place and more or less intact lent it a measure of continuity and stability which helped it to survive the upheavals of partition and independence.

By 1951, when the CPI's 'stay where you are' order to the party faithful in the east was finally revoked, that policy had already yielded unexpected dividends. In the first four years after independence, during which the party had been plagued by squabbles over doctrine and gone through a difficult period of 'adventurist' deviation when it was banned and its leaders thrown into jail or forced underground, the comrades from East Bengal were officially absent, presumed to be still firmly entrenched in Pakistan. Since they had no right to be in West Bengal, they were in no position overtly to complicate their party's already troubled existence. Those who came into West Bengal did so by stealth, and remained like Mao's 'fish' swimming undetected in a sea of refugees. This kept the incomers out of jail during the mass arrests of Communists in 1948 and 1949. It also gave them first-hand experience of what refugees had to suffer at a time when the official party line was to pay little heed to their

[64] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 39–44.
[65] See table 6.3.
[66] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 39–44.

problems. As Prafulla Chakrabarti reminds his readers, the CPI, like the Mahasabha at this time, assumed that refugees were deeply infected by the communalism from which they had fled. By contrast, the comrades from East Bengal knew from their own first-hand experience that this analysis was flawed. Being refugees themselves, they were able to play a role in organising their fellow refugees while keeping quiet about their Communist affiliations. For the time being outside formal CPI control, they were able, from behind the scenes, to make common cause with male and female refugees from other parties and of quite different persuasions, without having to toe the strict, but changing and not always consistent, party line. By forging good working relationships with a wide range of influential groups inside the refugee colonies and camps, by creating cross-party alliances, and sometimes new supra-party organisations, they were well placed later on, when opportunities arose, to forge the electoral pacts with other parties on the left which were to transform the politics of Bengal.

By 1951, when the Communist Party of India formally decided to adopt the strategy of creating a 'democratic front' by allying with other like-minded parties and factions, its comrades from East Bengal had already taken big steps towards implementing the new strategy. Indeed, the CPI men from the east had in effect already created a 'democratic front' among the refugees, which the party was able quickly to deploy once it officially set off in these new directions. In August 1950, Communists organised the United Central Refugee Council, which brought on to its standing committee representatives of the Forward Bloc, the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Socialist Unity Centre, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (rebel group), the Democratic Vanguard, the Bolshevik Party, the Socialist Republican Party and even the Hindu Mahasabha.[67] This committee was to serve as a blueprint for the many 'resistance committees' and 'struggle coordination committees'[68] set up in West Bengal during the next decade, which successfully brought these varied groupings together in the fight for particular causes.

[67] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[68] Examples of effective cross-party committees were the Tramfare Enhancement Resistance Committee which led the 'One-Pice War' in 1953 against a small hike in fares, and the Famine Resistance Committees which spearheaded the popular demand for more and cheaper food in the ration shops. The fifteen-member All-Bengal Teachers' Struggle Coordination Committee formed in 1954 to fight for better pay and prospects for teachers included members of the All-Bengal Teachers' Association, the Socialist Unity Centre, the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Marxist Forward Bloc, the Democratic Vanguard, the Workers' and Peasants' League, the Revolutionary Communist Party of India (rebel group) and several others; it led the teachers' strike in 1954: 'A short note on the movement launched by the ABTA', GB IB File No. 371-47(i).

Through these committees, the Communists extended their influence through hugely visible campaigns and they did so without alienating these diverse would-be allies with whom they shared the opposition benches.

Almost inadvertently, then, and for complex reasons, the three largest left-wing parties managed to survive their passage across partition's great divide, and they did so without the self-destructive implosions which, in their different ways, both the Congress and the Mahasabha had experienced. After partition, the three parties of the left held on to much of their pre-independence support. In every election from 1952 to 1967, the RSP consistently won most of its votes in precisely those parts of north Bengal where the party had been most active before partition, namely in Murshidabad, Malda, West Dinajpur and the foothills or dooars of Himalayan north Bengal.[69] The Forward Bloc too did best in its old bases in Calcutta, Howrah and Midnapore.[70] For its part, the CPI kept a firm grip over its pre-partition strongholds in West Bengal: in Darjeeling (where it had won a seat in 1945–6), in the north Bengal tea gardens and Tebhaga areas, and in some parts of Midnapore, as well as in the industrial and urban zones in and around Calcutta and Asansol, where the party had long been active.[71] That all three parties continued to

[69] In 1952, the Revolutionary Socialist Party won no seats, but its candidates came second in Alipur Duar (Jalpaiguri), Balurghat (West Dinajpur), Kaliachak South (Malda) and Behrampore (Murshidabad). The Revolutionary Socialist Party put up several candidates in Calcutta, but without success. In 1957, it won the Balurghat seat, and took second place in Kalchini (Jalpaiguri), Alipur Duar, Naoda and Kandi (both in Murshidabad). It also won the Muchipara seats in Calcutta. In 1962, it won Kalchini and Madarihat in Jalpaiguri, Tapan in West Dinajpur and Khargram in Murshidabad. It also was runner-up to the Congress in a number of other constituencies in these districts, narrowly losing Muchipara in Calcutta to a Congress rival but winning Bolpur in Birbhum. In 1967, the pattern was identical: the party won Alipur Duar, Balurghat Tapan, Suti and Barwan, its north Bengal strongholds, and lost Naoda by just 150 votes. It also won a seat in Calcutta. This analysis is based on D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*, for the relevant years.

[70] In 1952, the only electoral successes of the Forward Bloc (including the Ruikar group) were in Calcutta, Howrah, Birbhum and Midnapore. In 1957, the same pattern was repeated, when the Forward Bloc did particularly well in Howrah and also won a couple of seats in the 24 Parganas: *ibid.*

[71] In 1952, the Communist Party of India won twenty-eight seats and did best in areas where it had been a significant political force before 1947. It won one seat in Darjeeling and one in Malda, and received over 20 per cent of the vote in two other constituencies in these two districts, where its cadres had long been active in the tea estates and among sharecroppers. In the 24 Parganas, part of the industrial belt in which the party had from the start worked vigorously, the Communist Party of India won six seats, one in Baranagar, where it won a spectacular majority, with a 56.2 per cent share of all the votes; in four other constituencies, its candidates were close runners-up. It did well in Calcutta, where it won three seats, two of them in the industrial suburbs of Manicktola and Belgachia, and came second in four others. In Hooghly, it won four seats (one of which was Arambagh). It did impressively well in Midnapore, winning six seats and

command their traditional bases is proof positive that the powerful personal ties and loyalties around which party solidarity on the left tended to be built – in turn nurtured in the intensely secretive and highly charged atmosphere of the terrorist cells – helped the troika to survive the traumas of partition. As far as the parties of the left were concerned, their old networks of alliance and their long-cultivated spheres of influence were not shattered by 1947 and its aftermath. In time, this proved to be an important factor in the successful political enterprise by which the left wrested power from the Congress.

This was the landscape that determined the shape of the new electoral alliances which came to dominate West Bengal's politics after 1957. Leaders of all three parties recognised that they were much stronger in some constituencies than in others. They came to see that the way forward was for them to make deals with each other to clear the way in particular constituencies for the party which had the greatest chance of defeating the Congress. Alliances of this sort also helped to allay worries among the smaller political fry that they would simply be swallowed up by the CPI, the big fish in the pond. Admittedly, some refugee committees at first stood aloof from the United Central Refugee Council and set up their own alternative committee. But in time even those who had been the most chary of the CPI began to recognise the merits of working with it and not splitting the vote of their supporters when they joined to challenge the Congress. The 1952 elections showed what a costly mistake the left-wing opposition had made by its failure to work together. But it also underlined the fact that each of the three parties still retained much of their influence intact in particular constituencies which they had long cultivated. It followed that the best strategy for future elections would be alliances by which all three agreed to respect each other's spheres of influence and to throw their supporters unitedly against the Congress.

In due course, this plan of action developed, however imperfectly, to cover not only their traditional supporters but also the new constituents which each party was trying to woo. Gentlemen's agreements of a makeshift sort to stand back wherever one party clearly had the edge over the others came to be the order of the day. If, for example, one party had set up a union of workers in a particular mill, or had brought the local bosses of one or other bustee or slum under its wing, the other parties agreed informally to give them a clear run, avoiding costly head-on collisions and

polling over 20 per cent of the vote in four others. It also won two seats in Burdwan (Katwa and Ketugram). See D. Banerjee, *Electoral recorder*; John Osgood Field and Marcus F. Franda, *Electoral politics in the Indian states. The Communist parties of West Bengal*, Delhi, 1974. The close congruence between these results and the party's strongholds before partition is demonstrated in tables 6.3 and 6.4.

destructive turf wars among themselves.[72] The sharp boundaries between constituencies which one or other party regarded as their own patch, a distinctive feature of the new political order in West Bengal,[73] emerged out of these tacit territorial understandings between the parties of the left. It was also to produce, in due course, the growing trend towards elections in which the contests tended to be bipolar, with Congress candidates forced to fight their strongest opponent from the left in each constituency. These patterns of accommodation gave West Bengal's politics the semblance of having become a two-party system long before a large and stable opposition to the Congress appeared in any other state of independent India, or indeed at the centre itself.

Forging new alliances: refugees, Muslims and the parties of the left

Deals of this kind between Bengal's three main parties on the left were all the more significant because, in their different ways, the troika learnt successfully to come to terms with the new electoral balances created by partition and independence. Universal franchise proved to suit them well. After partition, proportionally many more of the voters in West Bengal came from the lower castes and tribes and more of them worked in the plantations, mines and factories where the Communists had long been active. More of the electorate now lived in overcrowded urban or semi-urban settings, more were Bengali-speaking, and many more were

[72] For instance, an intelligence report on the Goushala and Chandmari camps in Nadia noted that most refugees, estimated at 80 per cent, were supporters of the Communist Party of India, 15 per cent supported the Forward Bloc (Marxist) and only a handful backed the Congress. 'Both Communist Party of India and FB members have made a working alliance with regard to the refugees in order to thwart the Congress and contest the ensuing Assembly elections': Statement of information dated 3 April 1949, GB IB File No. 1838–48. In 1954, when the All-Bengal Teachers' Association launched a campaign for higher wages, 'most of the left political parties' joined the All-Bengal Teachers' Struggle Coordination Committee. Those arrested in the demonstrations included members not only of the Communist Party, but also of the Socialist Unity Centre, the Socialist Republican Party and the Bolshevik Party of India: 'Facts and circumstances on the basis of which members of various political parties were arrested on 16.1.1954 under the Preventive Detention Act, 1950', GB IB File No. 371/47–1. In 1955, the Socialist Unity Centre, which had influence over 'one section' of the Fire Service Workers' Union, and the Communist Party, which 'had influence over the Howrah station workers', 'worked in harmony during their "Fall-in Strike"' and were successful in forcing the government to increase its insurance payments to the firemen: DCP SB Secret report dated 4 April 1955, GB IB File No. 91-47.

[73] It was most strikingly evident in Calcutta, where every inch of wall space was covered in political slogans and symbols, all carefully apportioned between the different parties.

unemployed. The influx of refugees reinforced these trends, all of which were grist to the electoral mill of the parties of the left.

These changes helped to produce an electorate in West Bengal susceptible to the programmes and propaganda of the left, and this was particularly the case among the refugees. By 1967, one in every five persons in West Bengal was a refugee or had been born into a refugee family, and there was hardly a refugee camp or colony committee which had not been infiltrated by parties of the left. For their part, from the early 1950s the left-wing comrades threw themselves actively into the project of bringing the refugees behind them, as Prafulla Chakrabarti's riveting account so vividly describes.[74] But as every party came to learn, organisation, although necessary, was not sufficient. However carefully the seed was sown, if the soil was not fertile, it would at best produce a meagre crop of electoral support. The refugees were no more a 'natural' constituency of the left than they were 'naturally' predisposed to vote for the Mahasabha. In the Punjab and in Delhi, refugees by and large backed the Congress, and those refugees disillusioned with the Congress there tended to turn not to the parties of the left but to the Hindu right.[75]

The distinctive factor in Bengal was that the refugee movements developed a reciprocal dynamic of their own which made them receptive to overtures from the left. The failure of the centre and of the state government to address the problems of the refugees, and the stubborn indifference of Nehru to their woes, did not at a stroke drive the refugees into the arms of the Communists. But government's failures served in time to undermine refugee allegiance to the Congress. In 1948, Nehru further dented their still powerful residual loyalty to the ruling party when a delegation from the Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishad came to the Jaipur session of the Congress in 1948 to make their case.[76] In what must surely be one of his most breathtakingly insensitive put-downs, Nehru haughtily refused to give them a hearing on the ground that they were 'foreigners' and should therefore address themselves to

[74] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 39–44.

[75] Dipankar Gupta, *The context of ethnicity. Sikh identity in a comparative perspective*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 20–51.

[76] After this, the Congress's influence over the refugees noticeably began to wane, as became evident in November 1948 when Amritalal Chatterjee, Congressman and first president of the NVBKP, visited the Gosala refugee camp in Nadia. On reaching the camp, Chatterjee hoisted the national flag and hectored the refugees on why the flag was so important a symbol of the new, and Congress, India. He instructed them to be 'self-supporting' because 'Government was in no way responsible' for their miseries and could do nothing to help them. But, irritated by his officiousness, 'a section of the refugee crowd openly challenged Chatterjee's version'. Chatterjee was sufficiently embarrassed by the storm of protest from his refugee audience to tender his resignation soon afterwards: extract from the WCR on the SP Nadia for the week ending 12 November 1948, GB IB File No. 1809–48 (Nadia).

government's 'Foreign Bureau'. When the NVBKP elected a new executive committee in December 1948, significantly it included many fewer Congressmen than it had done in the past.[77]

As time passed, the refugees became increasingly disenchanted with the Congress. The savage Congress campaigns to drive out its East Bengal members from its internal leadership became public knowledge, and the Hooghly bosses made no effort to disguise their virulently anti-refugee sentiments. Everyone could see that the Congress government of West Bengal had neither the will to give the refugees the help they wanted nor any intention of doing so. Whatever little government did for the refugees was done with no grace, in a grudging, dilatory and high-handed manner. Disappointment among the refugees gradually turned into a dangerously bitter anger against the entire Congress establishment. As their fury came to provide fire to one campaign after another, the refugees no longer begged for help. Abandoning their mendicant stance, they demanded as a matter of right the assistance that the government had so signally failed to provide them. The language in which they put their demands grew overtly more socialistic, and those who spoke for the refugees were increasingly attracted towards parties with revolutionary agendas.

This represented a tectonic shift in Bengal's political geology. It had as much to do with the particular circumstances in which the refugees found themselves as with the purposive efforts by left-wing parties to win their support. The basic demand of refugees, reiterated whenever they met together, was that they should all be given relief until they were able to stand on their own feet. By relief, refugees were not talking of the paltry 'doles' handed out by government to the weak and infirm on the condition that they went away to distant camps, but enough food for *all* refugees, free education for their children, free medical care and clothing, and housing inside clean and sanitary camps. Full rehabilitation meant being given a roof over their heads in places where refugees wanted to live, and regular paid employment. These demands for economic assistance came to be cast in socialist and Marxist idioms, since it would not have been easy or logical for the refugees to claim these entitlements to economic 'rights' or 'goods' for themselves alone while other, equally destitute Indians were left in the cold. Consequently refugee committees, sometimes unconsciously but often by design, drifted into supporting the calls by the left for a grand social transformation which would give much greater economic security and opportunity to *all* the poor and the lowly among the citizens of the new India.

[77] P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 51–2.

There were also good practical reasons why the refugees found it politic to link their demands to the left-wing's clarion calls for India to become a more egalitarian society. If they had decided to fight alone for their particularist demands, the refugees would have found themselves politically isolated and vulnerable to campaigns of 'sons of the soil' which would surely have been drummed up against them. More to the point, a social and political transformation in West Bengal was essential if the refugees' basic demands were to have any hope of being realised. Their insistence, for example, that refugees should be rehabilitated in West Bengal had arisen of its own accord, for the good reason that refugees could see that their best chance of being assimilated and making good would be in places where they had connections of kin, caste, culture and language. This refugee demand came to have support from many of the political parties in Bengal, particularly on the left, whether out of conviction or out of calculation.[78] But government continued to stick to its line that West Bengal was already far too overcrowded to house millions of refugees and it simply did not have enough 'spare' land to satisfy these demands. If the dispossessed were to be given plots to cultivate in West Bengal, the land system would have had to be fundamentally reformed. Not surprisingly, refugees took the lead in demanding radical land reform, the abolition of the zamindari system and more equitable laws imposing ceilings on the amount of urban land which the privileged could own.[79] In much the same way, the call for adequate free rations for refugees came increasingly to be linked to a general critique of the government's food policy and its failure to provide the public at large with enough food at affordable prices.[80]

Likewise, it was the campaign against the eviction of refugee squatters, rather than conversion to Marxist ways of thinking, that

[78] A secret report on why refugees in Nadia did not want to leave Bengal observed that 'this is purely their voluntary and sentimental objection. They say that they have been born in Bengal and will die in Bengal. There is no provocation or incitement from outside. Some of the refugees have even fled from the camp for fear of being transferred outside Bengal': 'Copy of a report of a District Investigating Officer of Nadia District', dated 23 April 1950, GB IB File No. 1809/48 (Nadia).

[79] In 1949, the refugee movement's charter reflected these trends when the NVBKP appended the following 'long-term demands' to its wish list: 'The zamindari system must be abolished without compensation, and the land must be distributed to the poor peasants, the landless and the poor refugees according to their needs; (2) . . . arrangements must be made to ensure regular employment and livelihood for refugees and all other members of society and to give their lives greater dignity; (3) free primary education must be provided and teachers must be paid a living wage': *Desher janagana o bastuhara bhaiboner prati Nikhil Vanga Bastuhara Karma Parishader dak* ('The call of the NVBKP to the people of the country and to refugee brothers and sisters') (no date but evidently published in or before July 1949, probably from Calcutta), GB IB File No. 1809–48 MF.

[80] On 3 September 1950, the UCRC Working Committee organised meetings all over West Bengal, to discuss the 'food problem'. Similarly, at a meeting on 27 August 1950 of

brought the refugee movement into a head-on collision with the entrenched rights of private property. From late September 1949, when government ordered camps to be shut down, groups of refugees had begun forcibly to occupy vacant plots in suburban Calcutta and the 24 Parganas. Many of these plots were *dalanbaris*: the 'garden houses' or semi-rural retreats of well-to-do notables, second homes infrequently used by their owners. Refugees would enter these plots under cover of darkness and rapidly throw up makeshift shelters. Once in, they would refuse to leave, although in many instances they offered to pay a fair price for the land that they had illegally occupied.[81] To evict them from patently unused or underused plots was embarrassing for a government which had bruited it abroad that there was no land available for redistribution. When government tried to evict the refugees, inevitably this led to ugly incidents in which the police brutally enforced the landlords' rights of access, but usually turned a blind eye when the latter unleashed their hired thugs and bully boys to oust the squatters.[82] The galling contrast between the alacrity with which the state and its law-enforcement machinery rushed to defend the rights of property-owners, and its failure to acknowledge that destitute refugees had any rights at all, was clear for all to see. Refugees who had initially been prepared to pay landlords for the plots they had taken over became less and less concerned to defer to the rights of private property. Confrontations between the state and the squatters, with their modest origins in the refugees' need to have a tiny space in which to live, rapidly escalated into passionate indictments of the established order and the rules of property which it supported.[83]

Matters came to a head in March 1951, when the secretly drafted clauses in the Eviction Bill were leaked to the public. This bill, as the chief minister had to admit at a press conference on 20 March of that year, gave government what it regarded as essential powers to deal with squatter colonies which violated the rights to private property enshrined in the Indian constitution.[84] Communists and left-wingers in the squatter camps quickly seized this opportunity to launch a sustained and vitriolic

refugees at Shraddhananda Park, 'speeches were delivered criticising the food and rehabilitation policies of the Government': RPAR W/E 27.8.1950, GB IB File No. 1838–48 (KW).

81 For example, the fifty refugees who occupied four bighas of private land at Jhil Road in Jadavpur 'were agreeable to pay a fair price for the lands occupied by them': RPAR W/E 8.1.1950, GB IB File No. 1838–48 (IV).

82 P. K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 80–2.

83 Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel *Arjun* graphically describes the typical circumstances in which one refugee youth turned to radical politics because of a property dispute between landlords and a refugee squatters' colony.

84 See ch. 3.

campaign against the government. Eventually the government of West Bengal was forced to back down and the bill was redrafted to include a pledge that a 'Displaced Person' in unauthorised occupation of land would not be disturbed 'until the Government provides for him other land or hous[ing] . . . in an area which enables the person to carry on such occupation as he may be engaged in for earning his livelihood at the time of the order'.[85] This was a major victory for the refugee movement, because the redrafted clause acknowledged that refugees had an inalienable right to shelter which in its turn government had a duty to provide. It also elicited for the first time a statutory admission that in some circumstances the rights of private property could and should be disregarded. This also was a signal victory for West Bengal's left-wing opposition. The left, particularly the Communist Party of India, had successfully deployed refugee demands as the thin end of the wedge to open up a much wider front. Once the government had acknowledged, however half-heartedly, that it had some special obligations towards refugees and had been forced to accept that the refugees did have some rights, the left-wing parties escalated their campaign and demanded the same rights for everybody who was in need. This tactic was successfully deployed by the left in many subsequent campaigns. The refugee movements and the parties of the left thus developed a symbiotic relationship which served both sides well, and did much to raise the profile of the radical left in urban West Bengal.

The predicament of the refugees took them into the political catchment area of the left wing in other significant ways. The large numbers of refugees who had gathered in the towns and cities of West Bengal to look for jobs mainly lived as families. This set them apart from the rest of the urban labour force, most of whom tended to be single male migrants who came to the cities in search of work but who left their families behind in the villages. For these single men, their home base in the village continued to provide some part of the family's income, however meagre, which they tried to supplement as best they could by their paltry earnings in the cities. Wages in the cities and factories of West Bengal were predicated on the fact that the supply of single male workers was always much greater than the demand, with the consequence that wages remained scandalously low, often barely enough to sustain a single person, let alone the family left behind in the village.

In contrast, when refugees entered the workforce in large numbers, they needed wages sufficient to support entire families with whom they lived. They did not have the option of leaving their wives and children at

[85] *West Bengal Act XVI of 1951. The Rehabilitation of Displaced Persons and Eviction of Persons in Unauthorised Occupation of Land Act. 1951.*

home in the village. Even those fortunate refugees who found better-paid jobs in the city thus tended to live precariously close to the margin, since the earnings of a (generally male) head of household were usually not enough to support their families. The poverty trap grew ever more inescapable when the size of refugee families began to grow swiftly in the early 1950s. Increasingly, refugee workers faced the double problem of supporting families solely on the wages they earned and of having families which were much larger than the norm. This is why so many refugee families, even when their breadwinners competed successfully for highly prized jobs in the services, continued to be very badly off. With more mouths to feed than their seasonal migrant counterparts in the workforce, refugees found it difficult, and often impossible, to make ends meet.[86]

In these ways, the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees into the workforce placed new strains upon the structure of wages in urban Bengal. In the 1950s and 1960s, politics in West Bengal was marked by a growing clamour for higher salaries, for benefits and for pensions, in which employees in the service sectors, notably teachers and bank clerks, proved to be more strident and confrontational than industrial workers.[87] Refugees, prominent in the services and the professions, played a large part in these extraordinary displays of white-collar militancy.[88] The problems which the refugees faced in resettlement, in finding employment, and in supporting large and growing families explain why this was so. In these years, it was precisely those areas where there were large clusters of refugee families living on the breadline which mustered most support for campaigns of this sort, and which became the hotspots of 'red' radicalism.

In consequence, electoral support for the 'reds' grew markedly in urban areas where the refugees were concentrated, particularly in Calcutta and the 24 Parganas, the two districts which together housed over half of the refugee population of West Bengal. In 1952, two in every five of the CPI's candidates who won seats in elections were returned from these two

[86] See ch. 3.

[87] The major strikes which brought West Bengal to a standstill in this period were those of schoolteachers and of the Calcutta police in 1954, of bank employees in 1956, of the tramway workers in 1958 and of central government employees in 1960: GB IB File No. 371-47(i), and S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 261, 295–6, 396–8 and 460.

[88] This is why, for instance, one of the key demands of the West Bengal Primary Teachers' Association before they went on strike in 1954 was that 'the refugee teachers should also be made permanent in their services and placed in the same grade with other primary teachers without any discrimination. A special *refugee allowance* of Rs 30/- per month should be paid to them until they are satisfactorily rehabilitated': *Memorandum to the chief minister, ministers and the members of the State Legislature of West Bengal on behalf of the West Bengal Primary Teachers' Association*, 27 March 1954, in GB IB File No. 371/47(i) (emphasis in the original).

districts. In that year, the Communist Party of India won six seats in the 24 Parganas and took second place in seven others; it also won a further five seats in Calcutta, narrowly losing two others. Refugees played a key role in these electoral successes, not only as voters but as volunteers active in the cause of the parties they backed.[89] In 1957, more than half of the party's members in the Assembly were returned from urban centres where refugees lived in large numbers: fourteen from the 24 Parganas, with nine runners-up, and ten from Calcutta, with two runners-up. The Forward Bloc and the RSP also made substantial gains in urban areas where refugees were concentrated[90] (see map 6.1).

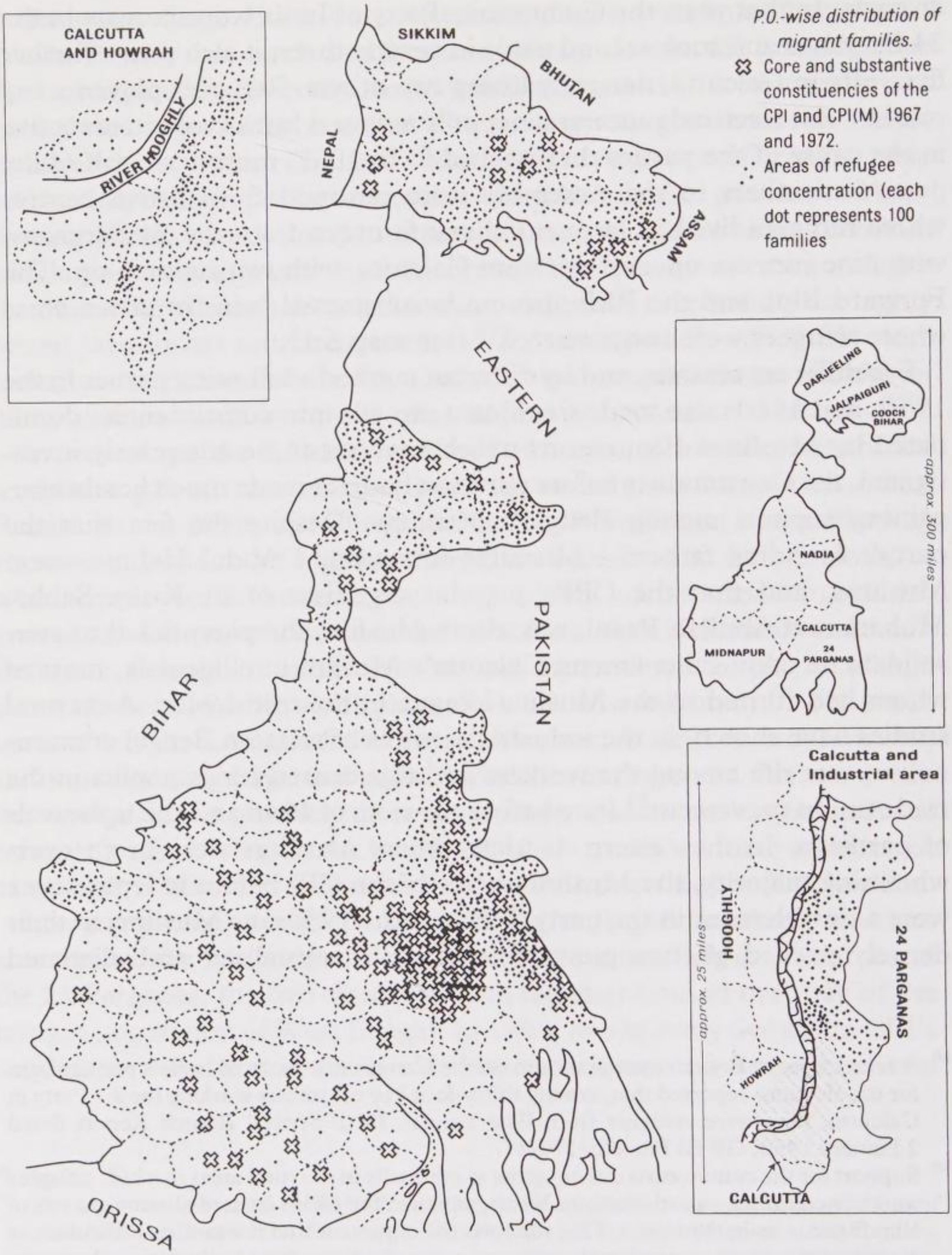
For different reasons, and by different methods, left-wing parties in the 1950s and 1960s also made significant inroads into constituencies dominated by Muslims. For reasons which have yet to be adequately investigated, the Communists before partition had not made much headway in gaining support among Bengal's Muslims. Despite the fact that the party's founding fathers – Muzaffar Ahmad and Abdul Halim – were Muslims, and that the CPI's popular organiser of its Kisan Sabha, Muhammad Abullah Rasul, was also a Muslim, the party failed to consolidate its early gains among Calcutta's Muslim intelligentsia, most of whom had turned to the Muslim League in the mid-1940s. As several studies have shown, in the industrial centres of western Bengal communalism was rife among the workers and this caused serious splits in the trade union movement[91] long before the riots of 1946 and the upheavals of partition. In the eastern districts, where Muslims were in an overwhelming majority, the Muslim cadres of the CPI before independence were a tiny element in the party.[92] But in the 1950s, as Muslims in their densely packed ghettos grew increasingly marginalised and alienated

[89] A secret Special Branch memorandum on the Communist Party of India's preparations for the elections reported that, among thirty-four key volunteers working for the Party in Calcutta, nine were refugees from East Bengal: DCP Special Branch Report dated 2 January 1952, GB IB File No. 267/47.

[90] Support for the communists did not grow as markedly in the rural areas in which refugees were concentrated – particularly in Nadia, which in the 1950s housed about a quarter of all refugees – as in the towns. This supports the argument that it was their difficulties as wage-slaves in the towns rather than the mere fact of being refugees which took them into the camp of radical parties. In Nadia, by contrast, where the bulk of refugees settled on the land (and much of it was land evacuated by Muslims), refugees were more conservative; and they continued to support the Congress well into the 1960s.

[91] See D. Chakrabarty, *Rethinking working-class history*; de Haan, *Unsettled settlers*; Subho Basu, *Does class matter? Colonial capital and workers' resistance in Bengal, 1890–1937*, New Delhi, 2004; and M. H. R. Talukdar (ed.), *The memoirs of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, Dhaka, 1987, p. 106.

[92] As Mukhopadhyay has shown, there were only seventy-four Muslims among the Communist Party of India's members in East Bengal. See table 6.3.



6.1 Core and substantive constituencies of the CPI and CPI(M), 1967 and 1972, showing areas of refugee concentration.

from mainstream politics, things began to change. Particularly after the anti-blasphemy agitation of 1956, when their concern to protect the reputation of the Prophet had been ridiculed and denounced by the Hindu press, independent Muslim politicians began to see advantages

in making overtures to the Communists. In 1957, in the run-up to the elections, Syed Badruddoza held talks with 'some leftist party leaders' and 'urged Muslims to support the leftist candidates'.[93] In return, the parties of the left helped him to win the Raninagar seat from the incumbent Congress candidate. After the election, Badruddoza denounced Jyoti Basu, the CPI leader, for not paying sufficient heed to 'the plight of Muslims',[94] an indication of the extent to which the left-wing parties, and particularly the CPI, had succeeded by 1957 in capitalising on widespread anti-Congress feeling among Muslim voters and their leaders.

Much assiduous, finely tuned work and much careful manoeuvring lay behind this rapprochement between the left and Muslims. Too blatant an appeal to Muslim sentiment would have laid the politicians of the left open to the charge of pandering to communalism. It would also have put at risk the support of the vitally important Hindu refugee constituency which they had so painstakingly built up. Yet Muslims were too numerous and potentially too considerable a weight in the political balance of Bengal to be ignored by any party wanting to do well under the new franchise; and increasingly the left began to take up carefully chosen 'Muslim' causes. Significantly, one of the first of such causes was the rehabilitation of displaced Muslims: the Communists insisted that 'both Hindu and Muslim' refugees should be rehabilitated by government. Wherever possible, the Communists also made capital out of supposedly 'secular' questions which concerned Muslims, such as the welfare of backward 'Momin' Muslim workers,[95] the war in Algeria[96] or government policy towards Kashmir and Hyderabad. In 1956, the Communist Party and Forward Bloc both took a hand in the anti-blasphemy agitation, even if the CPI adopted a more 'softly-softly' approach than the Bloc.[97] In September 1956, a Communist, A. M. O. Ghani, helped to

[93] SFR for the second half of January 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

[94] SFR for the first half of June 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

[95] In 1959, there was talk among 'sensitive and educated' Momin youth of setting up a new organisation called the 'All-India Momin Conference (Leftist Group)', with the object of working for 'the economic, social, educational and commercial welfare of the working-class people belonging to both Momin and non-Momin communities': 'Review of Urdu daily "Akhewat", dated 14 July 1959, GB IB File No. 1666/56.

[96] On Id-ul-Fitr day in 1958, members of the Communist Party of India were seen at an Id congregation 'collecting funds for the liberation of Algeria': 'Observance of Id-ul-Fitr festival', Memo No. 340 of 22 April 1958, GB IB File No. 1802–57 (Part I).

[97] *Basumati* published an article which condemned both the Communist Party and the Forward Bloc for supporting the anti-blasphemy agitation: 'Amongst the leftists, the Forward Bloc has supported this agitation. The Communist Party has adopted a soft position [*naram manabhab*] [but] have supported the banning of the book. Perhaps the

organise a strike by Muslim schoolchildren in protest against the 'slanderous' book published by the Hindu right.[98] Communists were also vigorous in their support of the rights of religious minorities; for instance, by 1956, they had come to dominate the Burdwan District Minority Board.[99]

These efforts eventually bore fruit. By 1956, seven of the fifteen key 'Muslim' newspapers in West Bengal were taking what police described as a 'pro-Communist' line (see table 6.5). In January 1957 the party, according to police reports, 'deputed local Muslim workers' in Midnapore to pull in the Muslim vote.[100] In January and February 1957, police reports were full of stories of Communist leaders 'hobnobbing' with Muslim politicians; and in March 1957, the police observed that 'communal sentiments of Muslims were repeatedly fanned to the advantage of leftist parties'.[101] Before polling day in March 1957,

> The Secretary of the District Branch of the CPI [in Burdwan] made intensive propaganda on the Hyderabad and Kashmir issues amongst the local Muslims to rouse their feelings against the Government, as a result of which most of the Muslims of Burdwan Town decided to vote for the local CPI candidate, i.e. the Secretary of the District branch of the CPI himself.[102]

The fact that Benoy Choudhury, the CPI candidate in Burdwan town, who later became land reforms minister in the Left Front government, won by a paper-thin margin of under 400 votes,[103] shows just how crucial the Muslim votes he received were in shoehorning him into the Assembly.

Less successful, but symptomatic of the CPI's efforts to enlist Muslim support, was the election in the Bow Bazar constituency in Calcutta in 1957. There the CPI put up a relatively unknown Muslim candidate, Mohammad Ismail, against Dr B. C. Roy, the chief minister of West Bengal. This was a constituency which Roy tended to regard as his personal fiefdom. While counting was underway,

Forward Bloc thinks that the Muslims will forget Tikiyapara and vote for it. Let them dream, but it is wrong for the Communists to follow this policy of appeasement' (*Dainik Basumati*, 11 September 1956).

98 'A note on the agitation by Muslims against the publication of an article in *Jugantar* dated 20 August 1956 and a book "Religious leaders" published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan', GB IB File No. 3214–56 (Part I). See also ch. 4.

99 Report dated 10 September 1956, GB IB File No. 3214–56 (Part I).

100 SFR for the first half of January 1957 for West Bengal, Ministry of Home Affairs (henceforth WBMHA), Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

101 SFR for the first half of March 1957, WBMHA, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

102 SFR for the second half of March 1957, WBMHA, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

103 He beat his nearest rival, Narayan Chaudhury, a Congress candidate, by only 393 votes: D. Banerjee, *Election recorder*, p. 49.

Table 6.5. *Important Muslim dailies and weeklies in Calcutta, 1956*

Title	Frequency	Circulation	Political affiliation
Azad Hind	Daily	2,600	Pro-Communist
Imroze	Daily	2,000	Pro-Muslim Jamaat
Al Huq	Daily	5,400	Organ of the Rezai Mustafa, but pro-Communist
Asra Jadid	Daily	1,000	Pro-Congress
Rozana Hind	Daily	450	Pro-Congress
Absar	Daily	700	Pro-Communist
Asia	Weekly	400	Pro-Communist
Manzil	Weekly	1,500	Organ of the Anjuman Tanzimul Momenin
Paigam	Bi-weekly	6,000	Organ of the West Bengal Muslim Rehabilitation Board
Tabligh	Weekly	1,500	Organ of the All-India Al Hadis Conference
Qoran Prachar	Monthly	2,000	Organ of the Tabligh Jamaat
Moawin	Monthly	300	Pro-Communist
Insaaf	Weekly	500	Pro-Communist
Asaar	Weekly	500	Pro-Communist

Source: GB IB File 2114–55.

a large number of leftist supporters including a big contingent of Muslims collected in front of the building where the counting was going on. A rumour spread in the afternoon that Mohammad Ismail had defeated the Chief Minister by about 700 votes and the leftist parties quickly became active in spreading this rumour in different parts of the city. At about 2 p.m. on the same day the Urdu daily, *Angara*, published an extraordinary issue announcing the defeat of the Chief Minister. As a result of the rumour the feeling of leftist supporters was worked up to a high pitch and the crowd started getting unruly and disorderly . . . Pro-Pakistan slogans were raised by a section of the crowd, mostly Muslims.[104]

In the event, the Congress Goliath scraped home to victory in the election, but by the humiliatingly small margin of only 450 votes. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the 29,000 Muslim voters in Bow Bazar, many of whom had supported their co-religionist, had brought the chief minister to this sorry pass. Roy had been unduly complacent about being re-elected. Indeed, he committed 'the blunder' of taking with him a notorious Hindu militant, known to have had a hand in the Calcutta riots, when he visited the imam of the Nakhoda mosque,[105] a fact trumpeted abroad by the Communists. So despite their

[104] SFR for the second half of 1957, WBMHA, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.
[105] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 345ff.

'vehement' denials, the Communists were being a trifle disingenuous when they told a big rally that they had not 'fanned up communal sentiments of the Muslims in their endeavour to capture seats in the constituencies where there was a good number of Muslim voters'.[106]

None of this is intended to suggest that in the aftermath of partition Muslim communities went over *en masse* to communism or that they rallied behind the left-wing parties as a unified bloc or a dependable vote-bank. They did not. Many Muslims continued to vote for their own 'independent' leaders, and many more saw merit in continuing to back those of their politicians who had joined the Congress. But equally it is clear that the parties of the left made substantial gains in these increasingly alienated ghetto communities. They worked hard to recruit Muslims and to make electoral deals with local leaders who had Muslim support. In both of these endeavours they enjoyed a modest, but significant, measure of success.

Middle-class malaise: provincialism, 'anti-Congressism' and the left

Opposition parties with radical agendas were well placed to take advantage of the severe damage that partition wreaked upon West Bengal's economy, and they were particularly effective in exploiting the growing discontent among the urban middle classes over government's failure to improve matters.

That the blame for some of West Bengal's hardships could plausibly be placed on the centre's 'stepmotherly' treatment of the state did much to undermine the Congress position in Bengal. In the decades after partition, it was all too easy for its critics on the left to raise the complaint that West Bengal had been sacrificed at the altar of all-India interests. This was a familiar rallying call in the politics of Bengal, and it now found an increasingly receptive audience among the middle classes of West Bengal. Since 1932, when the Congress high command had vacillated over MacDonald's Communal Award which had savagely pruned back the power of the province's high-caste Hindus, many politically minded Bengalis had been convinced that Delhi did not have Bengal's true interests at heart. The expulsion of Subhas Bose and his group from the party in 1940 had done little to change this perception or to heal these wounds. Throughout the 1940s, Sarat Bose stoked the embers of

[106] Report of a speech by Jyoti Basu at a mass rally on the Calcutta *maidan* on 25 March 1957, SFR for the second half of June for West Bengal, 1957, p. 3, WBMHA, Political I Sec, File No. 4/2/57 Poll-I.

provincial resistance against the Congress high command. Developments after partition and independence, in which the centre seemed to ignore West Bengal's interests on every matter of importance, added fuel to these fires of bhadralok resentment.

The first salvos in the campaign against Nehru's government were launched, not surprisingly, by Sarat Bose himself. The bye-election in South Calcutta in June 1949, held to fill a vacancy created by the death of his brother Satish, provided Sarat with a perfect opportunity to attack the centre for failing Bengal. The left-wing opposition, indeed 'the entire anti-Government and anti-Congress forces', combined to back Bose. In an unprecedentedly heated election campaign – the likes of which Calcutta had not witnessed before but would see again and again in the coming years – acid bombs and stones were hurled at Congress speakers and one demonstrator was killed by the police. In an expression of anger which showed the depth of South Calcutta's disenchantment with Delhi, Bose supporters, shouting 'agent of Nehru, clear out', jostled and manhandled Mrs Sucheta Kripalani, who had been deputed by Nehru to organise the Congress fight-back in Bengal.[107] Bose's stunning victory against the Congress almost brought down Dr Roy's government. But, more portentously, it also revealed that many voters in Calcutta considered the centre to be 'anti-Bengalee'. Investigating the reasons for his party's shock defeat, one Congressman told the high command that

> I have got only one answer from the voters – i.e. they will lend their support when the [central] Congress will cease to be anti-Bengalee. In support they compared the rehabilitation work in the Punjab and Bengal, they cited the absence of any Bengalees in any Foreign [Embassy] as its head, the language controversy in Bihar . . . the exploitation of the I[ndian] N[ational] A[rmy] for general elections and then throwing them away as dirty rags and so forth . . . *Congress lost on account of provincialism.*[108]

The Congress high command was well aware of the dangers that regional sentiment presented, not only in Bengal but also in many other parts of India. This was why it decided in 1949 indefinitely to postpone tackling increasingly rancorous demands that provinces be reorganised on the basis of language.[109] But in Bengal, the question of linguistic states had already generated a great deal of heat, and it did not fade away as Delhi

[107] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 120.

[108] J. N. Ganguli to P. Sitaramayya, 17 June 1949, AICC-II, PB-3(ii)/1949 (emphasis added).

[109] The report of the so-called JVP Committee of the Congress – named after the initials of the first names of its members, Nehru, Patel and Sitaramayya – reported in April 1949 that it felt that 'the present [was] not an opportune moment for the formation of new provinces', yet 'if public sentiment [was] insistent and overwhelming, we, as democrats,

hoped it would. For his part, Sarat Bose did everything he could to ensure that the demand for a larger Bengali-speaking state remained at the forefront of public debate. At meetings all over Bengal, he insisted that Bengali-speaking tracts of Bihar and Orissa – in particular Manbhum, Dalbhum, parts of Purnea and the Santal Parganas – be transferred to West Bengal. In one memorable (but not atypical) speech, he urged Bengalis 'to follow in the footsteps of Pratapaditya and Netaji', both 'rebels who fought Delhi'.[110] Subhas's followers – even though they repudiated Netaji's brother Sarat on so many other matters – rallied to this particular cause. In June 1948, the Bengal Volunteers group, long-standing supporters of Subhas, took 'up the cudgels' in support of Sarat's demands that West Bengal be given more territory.[111] That same month, the Forward Bloc launched a statewide campaign on the Greater Bengal question, organising protest meetings in Dinajpur, Serampore, Chinsurah, Nabadwip and Howrah. In 1949, letter after letter to the editor of the *Hindusthan Standard* suggests that their propaganda had made a powerful impact: they all strongly denounced the 'unwillingness' of the Congress high command to give Manbhum and other Bengali-speaking areas of Bihar to West Bengal. The centre's 'complete silence and inactivity', these correspondents alleged, proved that it was 'either so partial towards Bihar or so weak that [it] could not stand by the just cause openly'.[112]

By the early 1950s, when the issue came up in earnest after the States Reorganisation Commission began its work, Sarat Bose was dead. But the Forward Bloc kept up the campaign he had launched: in May 1953, Leela Roy chaired a meeting of the West Bengal States Linguistic Redistribution Committee in Calcutta.[113] On this occasion, the CPI and other left-wing parties not only clambered on to the bandwagon but also sought to hijack it. Ambika Chakravarty – famed for his participation in the Chittagong Armoury raid and now a fervent Communist – got himself a place on the Linguistic Redistribution Committee, as did members of the Revolutionary Socialist Party, the Bengal Volunteers, the

[would] have to submit to it, but subject to certain limitations in regard to the good of India as a whole': *Report of the Linguistic Provinces Committee*, cited in Austin, *The Indian constitution*, p. 242.

110 *Hindusthan Standard*, 24 May 1948.

111 Extract from Daily Report on the Political Situation in West Bengal, dated 21 June 1948, GB IB File No. 1034–48.

112 Letters from S. Pramanik and T. Chatterji to the Editor, *Hindusthan Standard*, 23 June 1949.

113 Extract, WCR, W. Dinajpur for the week ending 11 June 1948; Extract, Weekly Confidential Report, Hooghly, for the week ending 19 June 1948; Extract, West Bengal Political Appreciation of Intelligence, 19 June 1948; Special Branch Daily Notes for 22 May 1953: all in GB IB File No. 1034–48.

Bolshevik Party and the Socialist Unity Centre.[114] Significantly, the Praja Socialist Party, led by the ousted premier Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, also joined the committee, an ominous sign that disgruntled and disenfranchised East Bengal Congress factions were now making common cause with the 'reds' on many matters. When Baidyanath Bhowmick, a refugee in Lake Number One Camp, went on hunger strike later in May 1953 to demand the 'return' of some Bengali-speaking tracts to West Bengal, the Communists were loud in his support. Ambika Chakrabarty of the CPI 'congratulated Bhowmick for fasting for a just cause, appealed to the audience to agitate in a democratic way for [state reorganisation] and urged people not to depend on the Congress government for the salvation [*sic*] of any problem but to help the leftist parties in bringing about a revolution'.[115] In 1955, when the recommendations of the States Reorganisation Commission were made public – and West Bengal did much worse out of them than it had hoped[116] – the left-wing parties were well situated to take advantage of the surge of provincial and anti-Congress sentiment they generated. That Nehru had allegedly dismissed Bengal's claims as 'the most unimportant problem' facing the commission, and that Delhi 'took away' from West Bengal some of the territory that the commission had wanted to give to it, created a widespread sense of outrage in West Bengal which the parties of the left were quick to exploit.[117] A far-fetched plan hurriedly hatched in Delhi to diffuse the crisis by merging West Bengal with Bihar, which Bidhan Roy went along with, simply made matters worse. Once again, the leftists pounced on the chance to exploit Dr Roy's troubles, accusing him of being a 'traitor' for 'selling Bengal to Bihar'. Once again, they succeeded in turning the issue to electoral advantage, beating Congress in two crucial bye-elections in Midnapore and North Calcutta on a specifically 'anti-merger' ticket.[118] In the event, Dr Roy backed down and withdrew his support for the

[114] Special Branch Daily Notes for 8 May 1953, *ibid.*

[115] Special Branch Daily Notes for 22 May 1953, *ibid.* See also Special Branch Officers Report dated 7 November 1953 on Baidyanath Bhowmick, *ibid.*

[116] The commission recommended that West Bengal be awarded only a strip of Kishangunge sub-division in Purnea, part of Gopalpur thana, and the whole of Purulia (bar one thana). For details of the state's demands and the commission's recommendations, see Franda, *West Bengal and the federalizing process*, pp. 18–35.

[117] *Ibid.*, pp. 27–35.

[118] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, pp. 314–16. Interestingly (and quite ironically given his own role in the campaign for a small West Bengal), Atulya Ghosh attempted to undermine the Communists' charge that the West Bengal Congress was failing to defend the interests of the state by claiming that the CPI had, at the time of partition, wanted to give all of Nadia and North Bengal away to Pakistan: Atulya Ghosh, *First part of the charge-sheet against the CPI* (West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee), Calcutta, 1959.

merger with Bihar, but the damage had already been done. The left parties, in particular the CPI and the Forward Bloc, had succeeded in portraying themselves as champions of their poor truncated Cinderella of a state against the ugly sisters ensconced in their Delhi citadel. After this, every annual budget emanating from Delhi, each five-year plan, all recommendations of the Finance Commission, and any refusal by the centre to do more for Bengal's refugees or to send food to the state were seized upon by the left to whip up resentment against the centre.[119]

The left was equally canny in its attacks upon the state government's myriad failures on many counts. It took particular care to concentrate upon issues close to the heart of middle Bengal, especially its humbler clerical classes. Inflation and unemployment were the chief preoccupations of these people. By 1953, more than a quarter (27.7 per cent) of the breadwinners of all families in Calcutta were out of work. Things were worst among the Bengali-speaking middle classes, where the spectre of unemployment haunted two in every five families.[120] Already by 1949, almost a third of all the inhabitants of Calcutta's tenements or shanties were middle-class people working either in the services (23.61 per cent) or in the professions (9.61 per cent),[121] who had been priced out of the regular housing market and forced into these bustees. In the years that followed, the cost of living – even in these unsanitary and unserviced ghetto neighbourhoods, swelled to bursting point by the refugee influx – continued to spiral upwards.[122] Throughout this period, essential commodities, especially food, were chronically in short supply. Prices continued inexorably to rise. This concatenation of problems made West Bengal, and Calcutta especially, a tinderbox of frustration, which the parties of the left knew how to set alight.

In 1953, the CPI, together with its left-wing allies on the 'Tramfare Enhancement Resistance Committee', called on the people of Calcutta to resist a tiny increase in the second-class tramfare of just one *pice*, a small coin in a devalued currency. Incredibly, they succeeded in bringing

[119] For instance, after the Second Finance Commission's recommendations were announced in 1957, the CPI leader Jyoti Basu 'issued a press statement on the allocation of central taxes and observed that the Second Finance Commission had done a great injustice to West Bengal by depriving her of her legitimate share of these taxes'. At the Assembly opening, Basu demanded that time be allotted to discuss the Second Finance Commisison, the report of the Official Language Commission, the centre's policy towards migrants from East Pakistan and the food situation: SFR for the second half of November 1957, WBMHA, Political I Sec, F 4/2/57 Poll–I (NAI), p. 3.

[120] *Survey of unemployment in West Bengal, 1953 (First Interim Report)*, vol. I, part 1, p. 8.

[121] *Report on sample enquiry into living conditions in bustees of Calcutta and Howrah*, Government of West Bengal Provincial Statistical Bureau, Alipore, 1949, p. 16.

[122] By 1949, 16.6 per cent of bustee dwellers in Calcutta were East Bengalis: *ibid.*

Calcutta to a standstill for this proverbial 'ha'porth o' tar'. Refugees and tramway workers played a prominent role in these events, but so too did students and unemployed and disaffected bhadralok youths. All through the 1950s and 1960s, campaigns and strikes organised by teachers, clerks, bank tellers, students and even policemen periodically brought life to an abrupt halt in Calcutta and in neighbouring towns, a commentary on just how susceptible Bengal's white-collar workers had become to the left's clarion calls for militant action. A remarkable description of the teachers' strike in 1954 by a passing observer reveals the growing malaise, the seams of deep discontent with government and the increasing solidarity of middle-class opinion with those already ranged against it:

> The teachers set up a record for passive resistance . . . Leaving the jammed traffic to look after itself, they [squatted in the middle of the road and] proceeded to erect little tents with torn jute bags and bamboos, and to read their newspapers on the carpets which the volunteers had by now brought. Hours went by but still they made no move. Lights were brought and volunteers' organisations consisting of tradesmen, sympathetic office workers and students sent food to the squatting teachers. The whole night passed, but still there was no change in the situation. The squatters continued to sit there, one batch relieving the others, and the volunteers still busy collecting food and money. In one day seven thousand rupees were collected. The harassed police force at last retired, leaving a small contingent to face a crowd hostile to them and sympathetic to the teachers. This would perhaps have gone on indefinitely. But at 2 a.m. on Tuesday, the police arrested the squatting teachers and took them away.[123]

In these decades, perhaps the single most powerful weapon in the left's armoury was the high price of food. Rice was in acutely short supply all through the 1950s and 1960s. The fact that P. C. Sen, the unpopular linchpin of the Hooghly group, was minister for civil supplies for much of this period made him the obvious scapegoat for everything rotten in the state of Bengal. Memories of the famine of 1943 were still fresh in West Bengal. This made the price of rice a hugely emotive issue in its politics, a fact which the radicals understood only too well. From 1952 onwards, one demonstration followed another on the issue of the price of food or its distribution. Charges of corruption and maladministration dogged Sen and his department. Step by step, these campaigns eroded such public confidence as the Congress government still had and gave an ever-wider circle of support to its opponents on the left. In its turn, the government grew even more heavy-handed in dealing with unrest, using batons, bullets and tear gas rather than the gentler arts of suasion. This increasing

[123] Intercepted letter from Samuel Wade to the Editor of the *Daily Mirror*, dated 17 February 1954, GB IB File No. 371/47(i).

resort to force, redolent of colonial times, did much to alienate government's middle-class Bengali constituents. In 1959, a 'food movement' launched by the left-wing parties led to five days of violence and police repression which left 31 people dead and 3,000 injured.[124] The Communists and others on the left of course denounced police brutality or *zulum* as it was known, and the 'Black Acts' which were seen to infringe basic personal liberties.[125] Their tirades touched a receptive nerve in a public increasingly disenchanted with a government which so readily used the hated armoury of measures devised by the British to control their Indian subjects.[126]

Significantly, it was an 'own goal' that laid bare the extent of bhadralok disillusionment with the Congress government of West Bengal. In 1957, Dr Roy persuaded Siddhartha Shankar Ray, a talented young barrister and grandson of Chittaranjan Das, to stand for election on a Congress ticket. Ray agreed, won the election and was given a place in Roy's cabinet as minister of justice. Less than a year later, however, Ray resigned in protest against 'the gargantuan evil of corruption' he discovered in the administration. Still worse for the embattled Dr Roy, Ray backed a no-confidence motion against the government moved by Jyoti Basu. Calling attention to the 'unsavoury reputation' of P. C. Sen, Siddhartha Shankar Ray then challenged the minister of food to stand against him in a contest for the seat of Bhawanipur in the heart of middle-class Calcutta:[127]

> I ask you to come and see what the most intellectual area, the most cultural area, in Calcutta, Bhawanipur, which has a tradition both intellectually and culturally, has to say. I wish to go to the electorate for a vote on one issue alone, the government's food policy, and let us see what happens.[128]

[124] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 420.

[125] Throughout these years, massive rallies organised by the left on Calcutta's *maidan* rang out with slogans such as 'Police zulum nahi chalega' ('Police oppression will not do'), 'Rajbandider mukti chai' ('We demand the release of political prisoners') and 'Eksho chollis dhara barbad ho' ('Down with Section 144'). See, for instance, the 'Report on proceedings of a meeting held at Howrah Maidan on 7 March 1954 under the auspices of BPTUC and UTUC Coordination Committee', GB IB File No. 371/47(i).

[126] As one Congressman from Bengal told Nehru, 'a Government that cannot control a disturbance of this kind ... without the use of firearms is a tactless, inefficient and incompetent Government, composed of third-rate people. It has no right to exist': letter to Nehru from an anonymous Congressman explaining why he voted for Sarat Bose in the South Calcutta bye-election, no date given, but on 19 June 1949 Rajendra Prasad discussed its contents with Sitaramayya and Nehru. See Rajendra Prasad to P. Sitaramayya, 19 June 1949. Both letters are in AICC-II, PB-3(11)/1949.

[127] This was an interesting and ironic parallel to the momentous electoral contest in Patuakhali in 1937, when the maverick Fazlul Huq challenged the Nawabs of Dacca to a contest in a constituency which was a part of his bailiwick.

[128] S. Chakrabarty, *With Dr B. C. Roy*, p. 377.

Sen refused to pick up the gauntlet which Ray had thrown down. But on 24 August 1958, Siddhartha Shankar Ray won a historic landslide victory against his Congress rival. As Dr Roy's faithful secretary, Saroj Chakrabarty, recalls, 'the electorate of the most enlightened constituency in the country' had vindicated Siddhartha Shankar Ray's stand, and 'his victory was a morale-booster not only to him but to the entire opposition [which] support[ed] him in the election'.[129] The heart of Calcutta, in its turn the epicentre and bell-wether of bhadralok Bengal, had judged its government and found it wanting.

In these ways, the parties of the left demonstrated just how adept they had become in exploiting middle-class Bengal's growing disaffection with Congress. They led the movement for states' rights against the centre and unashamedly drummed up Bengali patriotism in support of their cause. They mounted an assault against Delhi for disappointing Bengal's expectations, and made capital out of the repeated failures of the Congress government to repair its shattered economy. In a word, the left succeeded in becoming the voice of an increasingly militant and discontented middle class in a Bengal which had discovered, to its chagrin, that independent India was not going to pull any rabbits out of the hat and make its dreams come true.

[129] *Ibid.*, p. 395.

Conclusion

On 10 March 1966, thousands of people from all over West Bengal descended on Calcutta and marched to the government headquarters at Writers' Building. They formed a procession more than two miles long, paralysing the city. They came in response to a call from the parties of the left for a *bundh*, or complete shutdown, of life in the city. This spectacular show of strength followed three months of incessant campaigning by the parties of the left against food shortages, spiralling prices and government repression. Since January 1966, people all over the state had been looting markets for food and kerosene, students had been raiding their colleges, industrial workers had been holding their bosses hostage and daring party cadres had been attacking police stations and government offices. West Bengal's long winter of discontent had begun.

These troubles in Bengal took place against a backdrop of severe economic depression and widespread privation throughout India. For two years in succession, the monsoon had failed, making India's food supplies even more insecure than they were in normal times. In 1966, a sharp downturn in the economy forced the central government to devalue the rupee, forcing up prices all over India. In West Bengal, devaluation tipped the state's precarious economy into a deep and lasting crisis. Many of its ailing industries now collapsed irretrievably, and others went into serious recession. In the course of a single year, 25,000 workers were laid off, as many as had joined the workforce in the two decades since 1947. The price of food, already beyond the reach of the poor, now rocketed out of control. Despite his long experience as minister for civil supplies, P. C. Sen, Dr Roy's successor as chief minister, panicked. He issued draconian orders that were intended to restrict the movement of food grains and forcibly to requisition surpluses: ironically policies virtually identical to the ill-fated measures of the much reviled, pre-independence Muslim League ministry during the Bengal famine of 1943. These measures had not worked in 1943; in the crisis of 1966, they were as ineffectual as they had been during the famine. Those with surpluses of grain hoarded for their profit; others made big money by smuggling food out

of Bengal, spiriting it across the border to Bihar or even into East Pakistan. And to make matters worse for the ruling party, its policies restricting the movement of grain hurt large numbers of its own constituents, the very permit holders, traders in foodstuffs, ration-shop licensees, rice millers and transporters on whose support the Congress regime in Bengal had increasingly come to depend.

These pressures shattered the alliance which had ruled West Bengal since 1948. Atulya Ghosh had come under attack when India's new prime minister, Indira Gandhi, decided to break the 'syndicate' of Congress king-makers (Atulya among them) to whom she owed her elevation. Ghosh now lost the iron grip he had once had over the Bengal Congress. In the summer of 1966, Ajoy Mukherjee of Midnapore, a long-time key member of the Hooghly cabal who had made his reputation by berating refugees, walked out of the Congress. He set up a new party, the 'Bangla Congress'. This breakaway group was a magnet for many other disgruntled Congressmen and their clients not just from Midnapore, Mukherjee's home district, but from all over the province. In another ominous development, Jehangir Kabir, once a 'nationalist' Muslim and a dependable ally of the Congress, jumped ship and joined the new party, taking many of his co-religionists with him. Even more worrying for the Congress was the fact that Mukherjee, once notorious for his aversion to communists, now began to parley with the parties of the left. The cracks in the ruling alliance, which Atulya and his coterie had for so long papered over with patronage, were now seen to be wide open.[1]

The rest, as chroniclers are wont to say, is history. In the 1967 elections in West Bengal, the Congress received a severe drubbing from its opponents, leaving it with thirty seats fewer than it had won in 1962.[2] Ajoy Mukherjee became the chief minister of a short-lived United Front government, heavily reliant on Communist and Muslim support. The United Front's new ministry had to find places in office for the radical left-wing 'Marxist' faction of the now divided Communist Party, whose leaders made it a condition of their support that the apparatus of the state would not be used to suppress 'the legitimate struggles of the people'.

[1] This description of events is based on accounts in the main newspapers, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Hindustan Times*, *Hindusthan Standard* and the *Statesman*. Scholarly works on these troubled times in West Bengal include Franda, *Radical politics in West Bengal*; S. Banerjee, *In the wake of Naxalbari*; Mallick, *Indian communism*; Sankar Ghosh, *The disinherited state. A study of West Bengal 1967–1970*, Calcutta, 1971; and Atul Kohli, *Democracy and discontent. India's growing crisis of governability*, Cambridge, 1990, pp. 667–96. For his own account of these events, see Atulya Ghosh, *The split. Indian National Congress*, Calcutta, 1980.

[2] See the appendix for details.

This condition was put to the test when Marxist extremists of a Maoist persuasion led a rebellion of tribal people in the village of Naxalbari in the foothills of the Himalayas; and when, in the industrial townships around Calcutta, angry workers threatened, bullied or '*gheraoed*'[3] the captains of Bengal's failing industries. In both cases, the police obeyed the ministry's self-denying ordinances and stood impotently aside.

These developments in Bengal so alarmed New Delhi that Indira Gandhi and her henchmen stepped in and brought down Bengal's new government. In yet another twist in a tale of ironies, the ministry was replaced by another under Dr Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, who cobbled together a new alliance. This was the very same Dr Ghosh of East Bengal, the first and short-lived premier of West Bengal after independence who, two decades previously, had been unceremoniously ejected from office by Atulya Ghosh and his faction. But West Bengal did not appreciate the centre's heavy-handed intervention in its affairs. It touched a raw nerve in a political class which saw Delhi's action as proof, if proof were needed, of how comprehensively the centre had betrayed West Bengal. In the mid-term elections of 1969, the Congress in West Bengal was almost wiped out, with the Marxists making spectacular gains. Emboldened by their success, the Marxists in the second United Front government pushed ahead with their radical programmes in the countryside, urging the poorest peasants and landless sharecroppers to take over plots which the landed gentry had held on to by the illegal device of using nominal or benami owners. The 'land-grab movement', as it came to be known, did not succeed in seizing much land from the gentry and distributing it among the landless, but it did show which way the wind was blowing in Bengal. Congress governments in Bengal had always stood shoulder to shoulder with property-owners in their running battles with refugee squatters. But now the state government itself, with the Land Revenue Department under the command of a committed Marxist,[4] encouraged peasants to grab and occupy benami land, and ordered the police to look the other way while this unprecedented expropriation was taking place with government's advice and consent.

[3] To *gherao* is literally to 'surround' or 'lay siege'. The tactic became widespread in Bengal during this period: angry workers threatened with 'retrenchment' or dismissal would surround their employers or managers on factory premises, often locking them into their own offices for hours or even for days, and letting them free only when they had promised to redress their grievances.

[4] This was the radical communist Hare Krishna Konar, long associated with the Kisan Sabha movement, who knew well all the complex stratagems by which the landed gentry had subverted the land reforms of 1953.

Inevitably, the centre stepped in again to curb the 'lawlessness' in West Bengal. In 1971, Delhi slapped 'president's rule' on the state, four years before Indira Gandhi declared a state of emergency in the country as a whole. Rule from the centre did not bring order to the troubled province. On the contrary, throughout the 1970s West Bengal was in turmoil, rocked by one outbreak of violence after another. Universities remained closed for long periods and factories locked up and idle, while the police and army fell upon the Communists with all the force New Delhi could muster, beating, killing or jailing all those suspected of having revolutionary, Maoist or 'Naxalite' tendencies. For their part, the revolutionaries fell out among themselves, the Marxists, 'right-communists' and 'Maoists' turning on each other in a murderous cycle of vendetta and reprisal. Yet despite brutal repression from the centre and their own self-destructive propensities, the parties of the left in Bengal somehow came through these dark years with their popular following intact, indeed stronger than it had been in 1971. When the Emergency was finally lifted and elections held in 1977, West Bengal's electorate cut the Congress down to size, reducing it to an insignificant rump of just twenty members in the Assembly, and put a Marxist-dominated Left Front government into office.

The upheavals in West Bengal between 1966 and 1977 transformed its politics. For the next three decades, the Congress failed to loosen the Left Front's grip over West Bengal. Remarkably in the context of Indian politics, the Left Front's coalition governments have held together, despite internal squabbles; and they have pursued policies subtly but significantly different from those of their predecessors. In all-India politics, they have fought hard for states' rights against the centre, winning support for this cause from other regional parties. In Bengal, they have worked with modest success to implement redistributive reforms. No less significantly, they have been careful to give Bengal's Muslims a sense of security at a time when the rest of India witnessed a resurgence of militant Hindu nationalism and communal violence directed against that community. The arguments set out in this book help to explain why West Bengal has moved in these new directions in recent times.

Whether these changes amount to a social and economic revolution is a different matter altogether, which would require another study to resolve. The point here is rather more straightforward. West Bengal's politics after 1967 (whatever labels one chooses to apply to them) have followed a very different trajectory from what its founding fathers had anticipated when they created the new state in 1947.

Their objective, as this book has shown, was to achieve a peaceful partition and an orderly transfer of power which would deliver control

firmly and securely into the hands of the small elite of which they were the leaders. Those Hindus who campaigned to partition their province along a religious divide belonged to social groups whose influence had long been in decline, and whose political stock had been in free-fall during the last decades of the Raj. When, for quite different reasons of its own which had little to do with the hopes and fears of its outriders in Bengal, the all-India Congress leadership threw its weight decisively behind a demand for the partition of Bengal, they clambered hastily on to the bandwagon. Partition, they believed, would lead them out of the wilderness and deliver them from the tyranny of a Muslim majority. They expected partition – by creating a small, manageable, Hindu-dominated state of West Bengal inside independent India – to restore a lost golden age of bhadralok power and influence.

In essence, their goals were profoundly conservative. As democracy and the rule of numbers came increasingly to dominate the politics of India, partition was the means by which they sought to resist the march of Demos and the unappealing consequences of having dominant Muslim majorities in their province. By cutting out a critical mass of Muslims, they intended to stake out a homeland of their own over which they expected to impose their sway for the years to come. By allying with a strong centre in independent India, they expected swiftly to reconstruct Bengal's once prosperous economy. And by helping to vest the centre with the full panoply of powers which the British Raj had deployed to hold on to its empire, they intended by partition to manage and contain the transition to democratic rule, to restore their privileges and enhance their power. Where Canute had failed, they would succeed: they would push back the tides of history.

But these designs, like the proverbial plans of mice and men, went hopelessly awry. In the immediate aftermath of partition, long before the climactic events of the late 1960s and early 1970s consigned their dreams irretrievably to failure, it had become clear that their strategy was fatally flawed. In their desperate bid to restore a world they had lost, the authors of Bengal's partition failed to anticipate the changes which partition and independence would bring in their train. By looking at the aftermath of partition from their particular, but blinkered, perspectives, this book has tried to bring into focus the large, and largely unexpected, consequences of the Great Divide.

Partition's most far-reaching transformation, which its protagonists in Bengal failed to anticipate, was in the balance of power inside India. Partition significantly reduced India in size. It also altered the relative weight and standing of its different regions. By getting rid of its Muslim-majority tracts, with their awkward demands for special representation,

states' rights and group autonomy, partition enabled independent India to have the strong centre the Congress high command wanted, and to accept, without weightages, reservations and other such devices, the rule of numbers to which its leaders were committed. In turn, this accelerated shifts, long underway, in who controlled the levers of power and influence within India. The pendulum now swung decisively away from the maritime presidencies which had dominated British India, towards the hinterland: the heavily populated but less developed provinces of north India. Far from reinstating Bengal's influence in India, partition created a shrunken province increasingly marginal to the concerns of New Delhi, a lightweight in the contests taking place in the all-India arena.

In the province itself, partition undermined the foundations of Bengal's fabled prosperity. Partition's impact, as it comes to be more fully understood, will be seen to have destroyed historic networks of trade and manufacture and pushed the economy of the truncated province, and indeed of the entire eastern region, into rapid decline. The architects of Bengal's partition had given little thought to its economic consequences. Unthinkingly sanguine about the prospects, financial and fiscal, of their new state, they anticipated that there would be hardly any disruption and no lasting damage to Bengal's fragile economy. This was another of their many miscalculations. So also was their expectation that the all-India centre would step forward to save West Bengal, making good any deficiencies in its post-partition economy.

The gravest error of the architects of partition was their assumption that, partition notwithstanding, Hindu and Muslim minorities on both sides of the new frontiers would, for the most part, stay where they were. In mapping West Bengal's new borders, the plan was to ensure that the new state had as few Muslims as possible, not only in the province as a whole, but in every particular constituency, district or thana. What the architects signally failed to anticipate was that dividing the province to produce separate Hindu and Muslim states would spark off huge migrations. Inevitably, minorities left behind on the wrong side of new borders felt exposed and vulnerable, and fled from home in search of security among their co-religionists. These migrations across the new borders between India and Pakistan and internally within the new state fundamentally transformed West Bengal and its political economy. Partition changed the communal and social make-up of Bengal's localities; it significantly altered the balance of power and influence among its political parties.

These changes were no part of the Grand Design of the protagonists of partition, and took them entirely by surprise. They reacted by focusing narrowly on the immediate business of hanging on to power, devising ruthless measures to keep migrant challengers from East Bengal from

having a say in the affairs of the Congress party or the new government, while repressing refugee movements as threats to law and order. But the acute social and economic problems which flowed from these huge migrations were for the most part ignored by West Bengal's leaders until they threatened to overwhelm the state. Insofar as West Bengal's new masters had any strategy to deal with the influx of 6 million Hindu refugees, it was to keep them away from the centres of power in West Bengal. Indeed after 1964, the plan was to pack them off to far-away regions outside the state. These policies cut against the grain of the refugees' own efforts to rehabilitate themselves by seeking land, work and social support in places where they had kin or connections. The government's refugee policies were a dismal failure, turning the refugee camps and colonies into dangerous pools of discontent.

As for the Muslims of West Bengal, terrorised and displaced after partition, the new rulers treated their problems with a callous indifference and blank disregard. Muslims, just as their Hindu counterparts, had only their own resources on which to fall back, and such support and security as they could find within their own communities. This caused the Muslims of West Bengal to huddle together in discrete and densely populated 'Muslim pockets', which pushed them out of the mainstream of Bengal's political and social life, an increasingly embattled, isolated, alienated and angry minority in the new state. In another of partition's stranger twists, these developments paradoxically gave Muslims a more effective say at the polls. In turn, this meant that all political parties that sought office in West Bengal could no longer ignore this aggrieved and not easily controlled minority, an outcome the partitioners had not foreseen and would have much preferred to avoid.

The greatest irony, however, was partition's uncovenanted impact upon the Hindu middle classes of West Bengal. They had backed partition to improve their lot. Expecting to be the main beneficiaries of partition, they had thrown their weight solidly behind it. Partition was intended to give them a state of their own which they would dominate for many decades. Independence, they anticipated, would give West Bengal's Hindu middle classes, with their long association with administration and public life, new opportunities not only in West Bengal but all over India. By the time they realised that the new India was not to be their oyster, and that East Bengal and its Hindu minorities could not simply be wished away, it was too late for them to find and implement a new strategy. In West Bengal as in India, they faced unprecedented challenges. As the new province's economy slumped, as migrants from the east competed with the residents of West Bengal for jobs and homes and indeed for political influence, as prices rose and infrastructure fell into

disrepair, and as new social groups clambered up the ladders of success and demanded a share of the political dividends of independence, they were forced to recognise that partition had failed to bring them to their promised land. And as their hopes turned to despair, many of these Hindu middle classes became the most bitter critics and implacable opponents of the new order which they had helped to create.

In these ways, Bengal's partition frustrated the plans and purposes of the very groups who had demanded it. Why their strategy failed so disastrously is a question which will no doubt be debated by bhadralok Bengal long after the last vestiges of its influence have been swept away. Many excuses have already been made; and different scapegoats remain to be identified and excoriated. But perhaps part of the explanation is this: for all their self-belief in their cultural superiority and their supposed talent for politics, the leaders of bhadralok Bengal misjudged matters so profoundly because, in point of fact, they were deeply inexperienced as a political class. Admittedly, they were highly educated and in some ways sophisticated, but they had never captured the commanding heights of Bengal's polity or its economy. They had been called upon to execute policy but not to make it. They had lived off the proceeds of the land, but had never organised the business of agriculture. Whether as theorists or practitioners, they understood little of the mechanics of production and exchange, whether on the shop-floor or in the fields. Above all, they had little or no experience in the delicate arts of ruling and taxing people. Far from being in the vanguard as they liked to believe, by 1947 Bengal's bhadralok had become a backward-looking group, living in the past, trapped in the aspic of outdated assumptions, and so single-mindedly focused upon their own narrow purposes that they were blind to the larger picture and the big changes that were taking place around them. A kind-hearted reader might look upon their predicament with sympathy. On the other hand, history might judge them more harshly for pursuing their goals with such unconcern for the price they called upon others to pay on their behalf.

But Bengal's partition suggests a broader conclusion. Whatever the hopes of those who demand partitions, the outcomes are likely to disappoint them. Partition proved to be a profoundly destabilising event for Bengal. Like other partitions of the twentieth century, it was intended, by separating communities at odds with each other, to achieve a peaceful solution and somehow restore a particular social and political order which had existed in the past. In fact, partitions have proved to be crude instruments for these ambitious but delicate purposes. The history of partitioned Bengal is a cautionary tale with a salutary moral: partitions driven by the intention to maintain or to restore the *status quo ante* seldom achieve their purpose.

Appendix

Political parties in the West Bengal Assembly, 1952–1987

No. of seats	238	252	252	280	280	280	280	294	294	294
Year	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969	1971	1972	1977	1982	1987
Congress	150	152	157	127	55	—	216	20	—	—
Congress (R)	—	—	—	—	—	105	—	—	—	—
Congress (O)	—	—	—	—	—	2	2	—	—	—
Congress (I)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	49	40
Bangla Congress	—	—	—	34	33	5	—	—	—	—
CPI (undivided until 1964)	28	46	49	16	30	13	35	2	7	11
CPI (Marxist)	—	—	—	43	80	113	14	178	174	187
Krishak Mazdoor Praja Party	15	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Praja Socialist Party	—	21	5	7	5	3	—	—	—	—
Forward Bloc	14	8	13	14	21	3	—	26	28	26
Marxist Forward Bloc	—	2	1	1	1	2	—	3	2	2
Forward Bloc (Ruikar)	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Revolutionary Socialist Party	—	3	9	7	12	3	3	20	19	18
Revolutionary Communist Party of India	—	—	2	—	2	3	—	3	2	1
Workers' Party of India	—	—	—	2	2	2	1	—	—	—
Biplabi Bangla Congress	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	—
West Bengal Socialist Party	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	4
Democratic Socialist Party	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	2
Janata	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	29	—	—
Gurkha League	—	1	2	2	4	2	2	2	1	—
Samyukta Socialist Party	—	—	—	7	9	1	—	—	—	—
Socialist Unity Centre	1	2	—	4	7	7	1	4	2	2

Political parties in the West Bengal Assembly, 1952–1987 (cont.)

No. of seats	238	252	252	280	280	280	280	294	294	294
Muslim League	—	—	—	—	—	7	1	1	—	1
CPI (Marxist Leninist)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—
Jharkhand Party	—	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	—	—
Jana Sangha	9	—	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	—
Hindu Mahasabha	4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Swatantra	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	—
Indian National Democratic Front	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—
Socialist Republican Party	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lok Sevak Sangh	—	7	4	5	4	—	—	—	—	—
Independents and others	15	10	10	9	11	3	5	4	—	—

Source: Dilip Banerjee, *Election recorder, part I, West Bengal, 1952–1987*, Calcutta, 1990, p. 527.

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Joya Chatterji, until recently Reader in International History at the London School of Economics, is Lecturer in the History of Modern South Asia at Cambridge, Fellow of Trinity College, and Visiting Fellow at the LSE. She is the author of *Bengal Divided. Hindu Communalism and Partition* (1994).

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